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ABSTRACT

This book is the second in a series of works that seeks to examine the Arab-American experience. The original 1984 publication, "Taking Root, Bearing Fruit: The Arab-American Experience" featured surveys of 12 communities in all geographic regions of the United States. Such was the response to that report that its creators decided to continue the series until they studied all Arab-American communities. Chapters in the second volume include: (1) "Mosque on the Prairie" (Gregory Orfalea); (2) "Dabkeh in the Delta" (Joseph Schechla); (3) "The Mohameds in Mississippi" (Joseph Schechla); (4) "Syrians in Tin City" (Anthony B. Toth); (5) "Mahrajan in Michigan" (Christopher Mansour); (6) "Celebrating Tradition in Rhode Island" (Eleanor Doumato); and (7) "Going Home" (Eugene Tinory). The book includes a preface and an introduction and notes on the contributors. (SG)

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# TAKING ROOT

## VOLUME II

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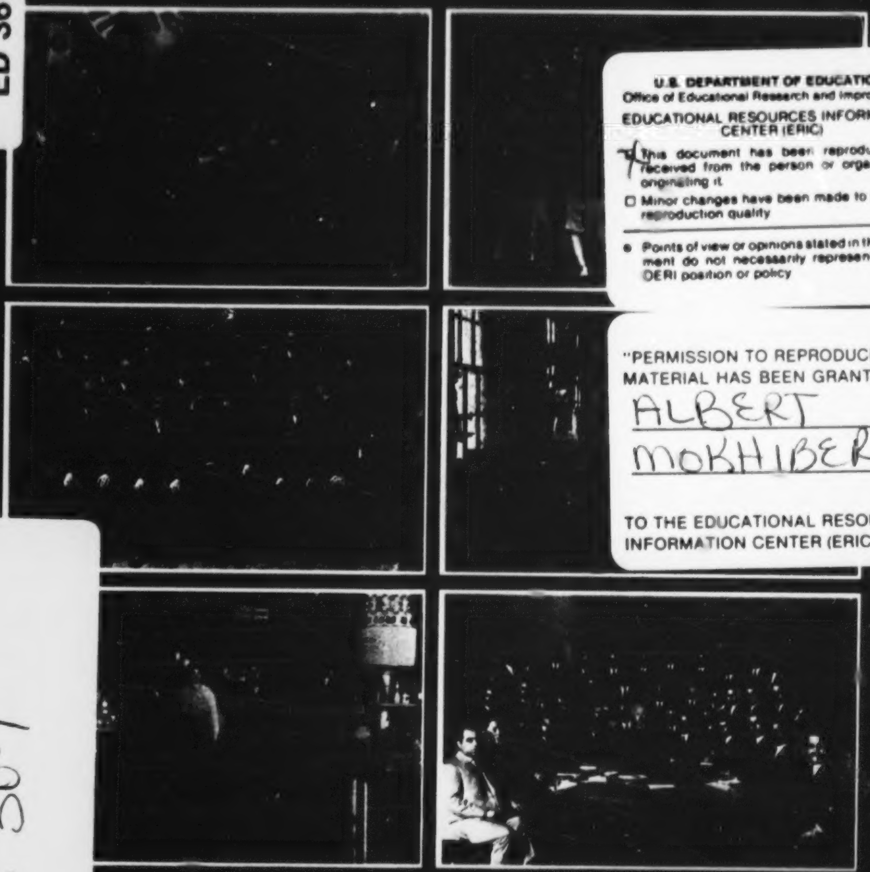

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Volume II of Taking Root, Bearing Fruit
Arab-American Community Studies

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# *Taking Root*

# *Taking Root*

## Arab-American Community Studies

### Volume II

Eric Hooglund, Editor

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
ADC Research Institute
Washington, D.C. 1985

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The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) is a non-sectarian, non-partisan service organization committed to defending the rights and promoting the heritage of Arab-Americans. The largest grassroots Arab-American organization in the United States, ADC was founded in 1980 by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk in response to stereotyping, defamation and discrimination directed against Americans of Arab descent.

The ADC Research Institute publishes information on issues of concern to Arab-Americans and provides educational materials on Arab history and culture, and on the ethnic experiences of Arabs in America.

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*For those who made the journey.*

# Preface

The contributions of our ancestors to this American culture are rich and varied; however, their stories and the value of early Arab-American contributions are generally not known outside of our own community. Many of our forebears arrived here from the Arab world before the turn of the 20th century, and by that date centers of Arab heritage were already taking root in American cities, towns and farms. The Arabic of our parents and great-grandparents was the common means of communication at the harbors, mines, mills, shops and on the great plains of this vast country.

Of course, for many second-, third- and fourth-generation Arab-Americans, the Arabic language is a secondary means of communication. But the stories of our forefathers are still being told.

In ADC's permanent commitment to preserving Arab-American heritage, this second volume of *Taking Root* captures some of the stories and experiences, the anecdotes and the voices of those who contributed so much to making us what we are today: 2 to 3 million Americans with a profound respect and appreciation for family, tradition and Arab culture—for it is the Arab world that has provided the seed for us to live and flourish.

*Taking Root* is a celebration and a tribute to all Arab-Americans. But perhaps more important than a means for Arab-Americans to know themselves, this volume provides an opportunity for others to know and appreciate us as well.

Omar Kader
Executive Director, ADC

# Notes on Contributers

Eleanor Doumato, author of "Arab-Americans in Rhode Island," is a candidate for a Ph.D. in Middle East History at Columbia University. She studied at Oxford University under Albert Hourani and lived for many years in the Middle East, including Beirut and Riyadh. Currently she resides in Providence.

Eric Hooglund, editor of *Taking Root,* is Director of the ADC Research Institute. He has a Ph.D. in Middle East Studies from Johns Hopkins University and taught Middle East politics for several years. He is the author of several books and articles on the Middle East.

Christopher Mansour, author of "Mahrajan in Michigan," is a native of Flint, Michigan. After graduating from Georgetown University with an M.A. in Arab Studies, he spent two years living and working in the Middle East. He currently works for a congressional office in Washington, D.C.

Gregory Orfalea, author of "Mosque on the Prairie," is the author of *Before the Flames: An Arab-American Search,* which is to be published by the University of Texas Press in 1986. He has also written three collections of poetry, *Pictures at an Exibition, Night Jump,* and *The Capital of Solitude,* and a volume of fiction, *The Dinosaur and Other Stories.* He is currently co-editing an anthology of 19 Arab-American writers. Mr. Orfalea works as an editor in Washington, D.C. where he lives with his wife and son.

Joseph Schechla, author of "Dabkeh in the Delta," is a graduate of Georgetown University with an M.A. in Middle East Studies. Before joining the ADC Research Institute he was an editor for the *Journal of Palestine Studies.*

Anthony B. Toth, author of "Arab-Americans in Newcastle," recieved his M.A. in Middle East history from Georgetown University. From 1982 - 85 he was a member of the research staff and served as official photographer for ADC. He is currently a Washington, D.C. writer and editor. ◆

# Introduction

### By Eric Hooglund

Many ADC members who were born prior to 1945 have fond memories of growing up in Arab ethnic neighborhoods. The United States in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s was still a country whose cities, especially in the industrial belt of the Northeast and Great Lakes regions, contained ethnically distinct neighborhoods. In these unique areas millions of immigrants and their American-born children sought simultaneously to preserve cherished traditions and to assimilate into the new culture. During the past 30 years, however, most of these neighborhoods have fallen victim to the relentless wrecking balls and the new migration to "melting pot" suburban developments. The disappearence of America's ethnic neighborhoods has meant the loss of many visable symbols of history. Some groups, notably Germans, Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles and Scandanavians, have organizations which have done valuable work in documenting the history of their communities in our country. Unfortunately, the history of Arabs in America is one which is little known, except in the form of oral history among Arab-Americans, and it is in danger of being lost to future generations.

Concern about preserving the history of Arab immigration to the United States and documenting the process of becoming Americans prompted members to express an interest in having ADC undertake efforts to ensure that the Arab-American experience would be passed on to their children and descendants. In 1982 the ADC Research Institute initiated a project to study and record Arab-American communities all across the country. The first result of this project was the publication in 1984 of *Taking Root, Bearing Fruit.* This book featured surveys of 12 communities in all the geographic regions of the United States. The response to this book was enthusiastic and convinced us that *Taking Root* should be but the first volume in a series that could continue until all of the communities of Arab-Americans had been studied.

In undertaking research on Arab immigration to this country, one is struck by the pattern of two distinct waves: the immigration prior to 1924 and that after 1965. Individual Arabs came to what is now the

United States as members of Spanish exploration teams in the 16th and 17th centuries. And the oral histories of some Hispanic families who have lived in the Southwest for three centuries include Arab ancestors. The earliest documented Arabs to settle in the United States are believed to be the Wahab brothers who established families on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, at the end of the 18th century. During the first half of the 19th century other Arabs purchased property in various states. One example was Jermiah Mahomet who, in the early 1800s, settled in Frederick, Maryland, where he raised race horses and was a successful real estate dealer.

The first real wave of immigration, that is significant numbers of Arabs, began slowly in the 1870s reached a crescendo between 1900-1913, and continued at a reduced level until 1924. In the next year, immigration from Arab areas was effectively curtailed by a new Immigration Act. This was a blatantly discriminatory law designed to severely limit the number of persons of non-northern European origins permitted to enter the U.S. Annual quotas were established for each country. These quotas were based upon the number of persons of a given nationality residing in the United States in 1890, that is before immigration from southern Europe and western Asia became extensive. This piece of legislation was the law of the land for 40 years; while it remained in force fewer than 200 Arabs per year succeeded in coming to America. The national origins quotas were not eliminated until 1965 when a new Immigration Act opened the door to immigrants on the basis of preferences such as technical skills and family ties.

Unfortunately, we do not have accurate statistics on the number of Arabs who came to the United States during the 50 years of the first wave of immigration. Indeed, the officials responsible for admitting immigrants during this period generally did not use the term *Arab*. Instead they tended to refer to speakers of Arabic as "Syrians" if they were Christians, and as "Turks" if they were Muslims. This situation resulted from the fact that the majority of Arabic-speaking immigrants came from what until 1918 was the Ottoman Empire's province of Syria, an area which encompassed present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and most of Jordan. The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic state whose capital was Istanbul. Because the Ottoman Empire was ruled by Turks, it was commonly called Turkey. Thus, initially, all the immigrants from the Ottoman Empire, whether Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, or Slavs, were listed as "Turks." This classification proved to be unsatisfactory, but it was not until 1899 that a separate designation for Arabs, "Syrians from Turkey in Asia" was adopted. Even then, Arabs with Muslim names often continued to be listed as "Turks." Prior to

1899, an estimated 20,000 Arabs came to the U.S. From 1899 until 1924, some 122,000 "Syrians" were listed as having been admitted to the U.S.

These "Syrians" established the first Arab ethnic communities in America. The largest and most notable were in New York (especially in Brooklyn, which was incorporated as part of New York City in 1898), Boston, Cleveland and Detroit. But by World War I smaller communities were found in scores of cities and towns all across the country. Virtually no substantive research, however, has been done on these early communities. While here there is a paucity of facts, there is no lack of ideas about what the first Arabs did. One of the most persistant notions is that these pioneer Arab immigrants came to the U.S. to be peddlers, and the Arabs of the Levant are alleged to be predisposed toward entrepreneuial activity. Indeed, the "Syrian peddler" has been immortalized in American popular culture via the character of Ali Hakim in the Rogers and Hammerstein play and movie, "Oklahoma."

Many Syrians did engage in peddling when they arrived in the U.S. There is, however, no data to indicate what percent of immigrants may have engaged in peddling or for how long. The Research Institute has been studying the occupations of the early immigrants. One important resource which has been untapped until now is the U.S. Census. The actual census forms are sealed for 72 years. This means that only the raw data from the 1910 and earlier censuses are available to the public. But since approximately 100,000 Arabs were in the country by 1910, an examination of the census records can provide valuable information about their settlement, family, and work patterns. ADC researchers have studied the 1900 and 1910 censuses for 10 communities in five different states. The census sheets are stored on microfilm at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. For each individual one can obtain the name, age marital status, place of birth, nativity of parents, language spoken if not English, year first came to the U.S. if not native-born, occupation, place of employment and other data. The findings of these censuses are incorporated in the community studies in this book. The data is particularly relevant with respect to peddling. Only in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where Arabs are enumerated variously as "Turkish," "Assyrian," "Arabian," or "Asian," are a majority of them listed as peddlers or merchants. In the other cities, the majority of Arabs, commonly enumerated as "Syrians," are listed as laborers working in various types of factories.

The 1910 census for the small manufacturing town of Waterville, Maine, reveals patterns which are typical of places such as Fall River, Lawrence, and Worcester, Massachusetts, Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Utica, New York, Paterson, New Jersey, and Wheeling, West Virginia. In 1910, Waterville had a total population of 11,458. This included 126 persons of "Syrian" origins. These Syrians included 79 immigrants and their 47 American-born children. In addition, there were seven persons with obvious Muslim names listed as "Turks." Of the 79 "Syrian" immigrants, 49 were men and 30 women. Forty-five of the adults had occupations; those with no jobs were primarily women. Thirty-eight of the employed—fully 84 percent—were listed as laborers; most worked in the cotton or woolen mill. The remaining seven individuals included three merchants, two salesmen, one barber and just one peddler.

ADC's research efforts are now only at the beginning stage. It is reasonable to say, however that the "Syrian peddler" idea is a stereotype. Like any ethnic stereotype, it serves only to distort our perceptions, in this case of the historical experience of Arabs in America. Some of the early immigrants did take up peddling, at least for a while. Some of them worked in factories. Some of them engaged in services like barbering, shoe repairing, tailoring, and banking. Some worked on construction, or on the railroad or as delivery men for coal, wood or other supplies. Others opened their own shops or were professionals such as teachers, and members of the clergy. And there were miners and farmers and artists and entrepreneurs. In sum, the experience of the early Arabs in America was as diverse as that of other ethnic groups who came in the great immigration wave during the generation leading up to World War I.

The presence of the early Arab immigrants in such a variety of urban occcupations is all the more remarkable when one considers that the overwhelming majority of them had been born and raised in villages. They were, in fact, part of the mass rural-to-urban migration of peasants from central and eastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin to the industrializing cities of the New World. While a few of the "Syrians" did become successful farmers in the United States, most of these transplanted villagers adapted to city life and soon established their own ethnic neighborhoods, sometimes referred to as "Little Syrias," where old customs and new ways blended.

Most of the pre-World War I immigrants were not able to read or write their native language, Arabic. In addition, upon arrival in the U.S. they had no knowledge whatsoever of English (except in the case of a few individuals). Yet, they placed a high value on education and encouraged their own children to get as much schooling as possible. This meant that the second generation, generally those born in America between 1900 and 1940, were socialized in the American school system as well as in their own ethnic neighborhoods. This process facilitated their assimilation into American society. Education enabled the second generation to move into a more diverse range of career opportunities than had been available to their immigrant parents, especially those who worked in factories. Thus, many of the second generation became successful in business and the professions.

The assimilated second-generation has not felt the need to remain in the old ethnic neighborhoods, and after World War II they began moving out. As the immigrant generation began to pass away, these neighborhoods declined; by the 1970s they no longer existed in many towns. In some of the larger cities, however, the old ethnic neighborhoods have been revitalized by the arrival of a second wave of immigration beginning in the late 1960s. This has been especially true in Brooklyn and Detroit (Dearborn). However, the majority of the new immigrants—estimated at 100,000 since 1965—generally are highly educated and already fluent in English when they arrive. Thus, they have been able to obtain professional posts here with relative ease. Like second- and third-generation Arab-Americans, they do not feel a need to reside in ethnic neighborhoods and tend to be dispersed in suburbs.

Today's Arab-American community, comprised of recent immigrants and the descendants of Arabs who settled in the United States as long as 100 years ago, has a history—and a presence—in this country of which we can all be proud. The aim of this second volume is to document this American experience. Unlike Volume I, which surveyed the larger and better known Arab-American communities, we have chosen to focus on some of the smaller and less well known communities. Each of the communities in this book is unique; yet each illustrates the common experience of adapting to American society while simultaneously holding onto the honored traditions of their ethnic heritage. Gregory Orfalea's study of Ross, North Dakota, for example, provides insight into how a community of Muslim homesteaders have tried to preserve religious identity. Joseph Schechla's monograph on Vicksburg, Mississippi, presents a view of growing up "Arab" in the deep South. Eleanor Doumato and Anthony B. Toth discuss communities in which members of religious sects which are little-known minorities in the Arab world, let alone the U.S., the Christian Jacobites (Old Syrian Orthodox) in Central Falls and Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and the Alawi Muslims of New Castle, Pennsylvania, have proudly kept their faith while proudly becoming Americans. Christopher Mansour's study of Flint, Michigan, provides information about Lebanese villagers and Palestinian townsmen who had to adapt to work in the automobile factories. In their own ways each of these communities have contributed to the texture and color of America. ◆

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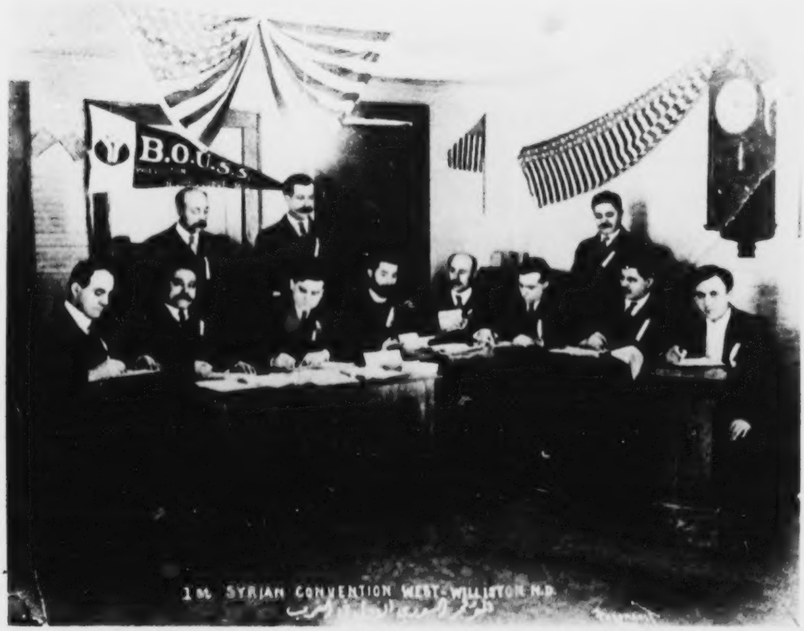
B.O.U.S.S.
1st SYRIAN CONVENTION WEST-WILLISTON N.D.

The first convention of Syrian clubs in the west was held in Williston, N.D., in 1918. Delegates to the convention represented Arab-American communities from as far away as Portland, Oregon.

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# Mosque on the Prairie

**By Gregory Orfalea**

The largest grain elevator between Minot and Williston is in Ross, a town of less than 100 people in the northwest corner of North Dakota. The elevator contains 50,000 bushels of wheat, most of which have been sitting for a long time, because the President has asked the farmers to retire their wheat and retire their land. A radar disc points at the moon from the front lawn of the oldest board-frame in Ross,built at the turn of the century. Common expressions are "Spose so," "Well, forevermore!", and "It'll have to do." To leave off farming and work for anyone else is to "work out."

As in all North Dakota, you invite someone at the noon hour for dinner and at six o'clock for supper. Lunch is a fifteen-minute snack at about three in the afternoon—a pop (never soda or Coke) and candy bar suffice.

In the summer in Ross a visitor will think everyone is a summer fellow until he realizes the stubble fields of flax and wheat have been ploughed into "summer fallow," fields unseeded and open to the blessed rain. The wind comes in a hurry.

Children leave town to escape after high school graduation, but sooner or later many come back disillusioned with college or city life. The milk cows are patient.

Saskatchewan is north about 30 miles, Montana mountains due West over the horizon. Teddy Roosevelt once shot bison south of here near Medora. Otherwise the wind is the only constant. There is nothing much historical.

Almost.

On a still summer day in 1978, with not a touch of tornado or cloud in the sky, Omar Hamdan bulldozed the first Muslim mosque built in North America. It was in Ross.

At the same time, half a world away, President Jimmy Carter was nailing down the Camp David accords and touched the hands of Sadat and Begin together, an electrostatic charge that brought a peace treaty and the fifth Arab-Israeli war in Lebanon. Omar could not have known this would happen and may not have cared anyway. His Syrian family had been in Ross for almost a century. He spoke with a slow rumble, like the warning of rain. There was no frenzy of Arabic rhythms in his speech, nor music of Arabic poetry, but rather the slow buck of prairie hummocks, a bass voice that cut itself off abruptly. He was angry. And so were the twenty Syrians left in Ross and nearby Stanley when they heard what he did.

On Memorial Day, 1983, Omar Hamdan poisoned gophers in the cemetery of his ancestors. It did not seem to follow from the act of someone who single-handedly destroyed the first American Islamic house of worship. Omar is torn, like the rocky northern terrain he farms . . . "with used equipment," he says. "I never buy new." It is June. He has just turned the stubble—fallow farmed. He is also confused by more than a vanishing Syrian past. The U.S. government announced in March 1983 that it will pay North Dakotan farmers not to farm, in bushels of wheat.

"Now that would be just like when Chrysler went down," Omar looks at his Indian-red hand. "Just like paying Chrysler in automobiles. Wouldn't have made any sense, would it? It don't for us either. We don't need more wheat—we need markets."

Unsellable wheat choking the elevators, too much snow and no apricots, government money going for missiles instead of bellies, decades of women in short-shorts on Main Street in Stanley instead of veils—was this it? Maybe it was his wife, whose heritage is "everything. . .she doesn't know what all is in there," maybe the ice-slough beyond the Muslim cemetery, but Omar leveled the *jami'ah* on a hot summer day where the land is infinite as the sky. The 20 Syrians left in Ross and Stanley called it desecration. One old woman named Nazira stood on the stoop of her trailer, took off her glasses, rubbed her blue eyes and said, "It was like the death of my child."

Omar claimed ignorance when told of the historicity of the Ross mosque, dedicated in 1930 at the height of the Great Depression to bolster the colony of Syrians. "Others might have known we were worth something here"—those among the 200,000 American Muslims in cities such as Detroit, Michigan, Michigan City, Indiana, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "We didn't," says Omar.

The North Dakotan Syrians hadn't held a service at the mosque for 10 years. Most of the area's Muslims had turned Lutheran by weather of time and dwindling numbers. For a long while they had gathered themselves and their language like a cairn separated from the stony soil to the side of the wheat. But now intermarriage and migration to Canada had broken down the identity of the group of eastern Mediterraneans in the blond sea. Most North Dakotans are German, Swede, Norwegian, Finn or Bohemian. *Ya* had replaced *ehwah* for the Syrians and they picked up the northern accent which makes *news* into *nooz* and all the o's become long and sonorous. The rock pile crumbled to pebbles. No mint sprang up from them. It was then that Omar struck.

Against the farmer's bitter purge stood the last fluent speaker of Arabic in the area, Shahati ("Charlie") Juma, a huge-fisted, raisin-skinned man of 80 with a tenacious shock of salt-and-pepper hair cut high above the ears as if to say in defiance, 'I have enough hair at 80 to cut, buddy, and so I'm going to make the sideburns real high.'

Charlie Juma shakes the hand of every living soul in Stanley, pop. 1,600. His hand is a warm clamp; he won't let go until he's read your fortune, raised you on your toes for a laugh, or told you off.

Knocking a Norseman's beer belly—a man who towered above him—Charlie quipped, "Hey Pete. You got two in there?"

Charlie was the first child born to the Ross Syrians in 1903, on the Juma homestead. In 1899, his father Hassen gawked out the window of the Great Northern train, liked what he saw in Dakota, got out at Ross, walked down the railroad ties and threw a painted stone to mark where he'd take his free 160 acres. Today Amtrak's Empire Builder line goes right through the original Juma homestead.

PHOTO GREGORY ORFALEA

The "Empire Builder" stops in Stanley each day. Occasionally Charlie Juma (left) greets Joseph Seeb, Amtrak agent for 30 years and a resident of Williston.

There were few people in Ross back then. The Juma family grew with the town; Charlie's memory is the memory of Ross—the Norwegians, Syrians, Bohemians, the duck ponds, rattlers and the tornados. He talks about tornados like Washington politicos talk about foreign tyrants. They cleanse and change things by virtue of destruction. Democracy doesn't change its clothes that fast. And tornados are not farms . . .

A member of every civic board in Montrail County from the Board of Education to the Grain Elevator Stockholders Association, farmer Charlie is loved by the people of the area. He walks down Main Street of Stanley like an old squat bear, holding people up with his paw and quip. Charlie is a North Dakotan Sancho Panza. But when it comes to his heritage he is an olive tree thrashing in a field of flax. Lines on the bridge of his nose betray pain at the passing of an entire way of life. Ramadan in the fields. Sulli with a rug in the wheat.

One senses a showdown between Charlie and Omar Hamdan. It will match a short, burly octagenarian with meaty hands ("I got 'em digging manure") and a wiry, handsome, brooding farmer who wears a cap printed with a hunter lifting a shotgun over the heads of two English setters.

Grease's spattering—breakfast time—at Sally's Cafe, downtown Stanley. Charlie's making the rounds. "Hullo, Joe. You still eatin'?" Wry smile. Squint of eye. "Hey Sam. How's your fencin'? Don't get stuck now. The cows'll get lonely."

Mrs. Johnson, taking her cup of coffee from her lips, nods, "How do you do, Charlie?"

"I do as I please." He grabs her shoulder and the booths move with routine laughter. These are farmers taking a long summer breakfast. Charlie moves his head around the cafe to see who's laughed and who hasn't. His left eye squints uncontrollably.

Born in the small barley and lentil farming village of Birey outside Damascus, Charlie's parents, Hassan and Mary Juma, came to the U.S. from a land drained by four centuries of neglect under the Ottoman Turks. Taxation was high and exacted without warning. Soil was poor and overland trade had long been siphoned off by the Suez Canal's birth in 1869. Hassen slept on a dirt floor at night while the Sublime Porte's representatives rounded up Muslim subjects who resisted conscription to fight the brewing nationalist movements that were tearing asunder the Ottoman Empire. Why did Hassen end up on the northern plains where winters were the worst in America? The mercury in North Dakota can dip to 50 below zero. The closest thing to that kind of weather in Syria was the Lebanon mountain itself, or Mt. Hermon on the Golan Heights, but mostly shepherds and religious anchorites lived there. The Homestead Act of 1862 lured the dirt-farming Syrians westward. Too, the Jumas were Muslim at a time when 95 percent of the Arab immigrants to America were Christians. They did not feel comfortable under the Orthodox or Maronite crosses in Boston and Brooklyn. They wanted land more than the rumored streets of gold. They were not the typical Levantine traders; they pushed further than Chicago. The legendary painted stone was thrown from railroad ties at Ross.

Soon Hassen traveled by horse-drawn sledge through the heavy snow, peddling linens in order to save money to buy farm equipment. Charlie shows a browned photo of his father with a friend standing up proudly in the sledge buggy, holding the reins, their dark faces like coal against the snow. Another photo is of the most famous Syrian of these parts in the '20s, a bear wrestler named Joe Albert. He has a bear by the collar looking a little stunned; it is not the Turkish sultan.

Albert with his bear brings to mind George Hamid, the Lebanese circus impresario who trained with Buffalo Bill Cody's show and became the Indian fighter's chief acrobat. Hamid was on a par with Ringling Brothers in the '30s in America. Then, of course, there are other entertainers descended from Lebanese and Syrians immigrants—Danny Thomas, Jamie Farr, Paul Anka. People to take your mind off divorce and taxes and traffic. People who distract by thrills or horse-laughs, these Arab-Americans. People who don't want you to look too closely at them, but on their dream, their persona . . .

Sally's Cafe is Charlie's stage. It sports some of the holy ikons of America's breadbasket on its walls—copper paintings on black satin of three different John Waynes, Elvis Presley with the fat chin, and American Indians with their heads bowed on Palominos. Way in the cafe's rear, above a plug-in painting of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, electric copper stars twinkle.

Charlie is joined under a bust of Wayne by a cousin, Laila Omar, and her husband, Clem. Laila works at the bank. Though wearing a common pullover and jeans, her short, black hair and bottomless brown eyes make her an exotic addition to Sally's.

The subject of prejudice comes up—Laila confirms that in the old days they were called Black Syrians, and there were fist fights. A field worker named Everal McKinnon for the Historical Data Project in Bismark who interviewed the Syrians in Ross wrote in his report of 1939: "Their homes, barns and other farm buildings are, in most cases, just shacks and look very much neglected. In most cases the barns look much better than the houses. They have exceptionally nice looking horses but only one out of 10 of the men are able to drive and handle [sic] horses well, although they all have them."

Charlie, who was one of the few Syrians to speak to McKinnon in detail, is insulted by that section of his report. He won't raise his voice, but his anger 40 years later is evident in a quick jab of words. McKinnon was wrong; our way with horses was just fine and our houses no different from anyone else's. And Charlie's nephew, Marshall Juma, is currently the Midwest's number one bareback bronco rider on the pro rodeo circuit.

"I think the Scandanavians have less prejudice than the Germans or Bohemians," Clem drawls. "My folks didn't impose prejudice on me—we're Swede. It's what you're taught at home in the final result."

Charlie butts in: "And you know, back in the old days there were no partialities between Christian and Muslim Syrians in Ross and Stanley. We had a few Christians. No partialities like they had down there in Williston." Williston—about 50 miles west of Ross—has a thriving Arab-American population now of over 100. They own real estate—the Habhabs, Josephs, Seebs. Another smaller community of Arab-Americans is in nearby Bone Trail.

Strangely, none of the Muslims in the area has any idea what sect of Islam their ancestors were. Until the recent headlines of Sunni-Shi'a struggles in Iraq and the Shi'a-Druze problems in Lebanon, as well as the Arab-Israeli wars, Charlie admits he didn't even know there was a difference. There was unity in the small community, and then the religion vanished. It never developed enough animosities and jealousies to bifurcate.

Coffee is poured by a girl with flaxen hair, meadow-blue eyes and a sweat moustache. She rushes to cover all the outstretched cups of the farmers. The heat from the grill and the bright street collide. Everyone sweats.

And the ruined mosque?

"It's a *haram,* a shame, they tore it down," Laila's eyes flare. "I don't want to talk about it." She crushes her cigarette and looks knowingly at her husband. "Charlie and I weren't invited to the meeting." The way she says this, it is questionable that there was a meeting.

"Oh boy, I ought to tell you about my first trip to Syria, 1980," Charlie ticks his coffee cup with a spoon.

He was invited by a Fargo rug merchant, James Khalid, to make a pilgrimage to the ancestral homeland. Charlie's sole surviving sister was still in Birey. None of his brothers and sisters had ever been to America, so he grew up as an only child in the New World.

"I told Jim, I'm with you! Just let me get my taxes paid."

Charlie and Khalid took a 747 jet and to hear the former speak of it is to listen to the first waking day of a Rip Van Winkle: "By God, the wings could stretch from this table clear to the street. Inside you could walk down these long aisles like it was a street! It was a prison, though, not speaking English, for me. They still live poor over there, no plumbing, but they manage. I felt bad, like I wanted to do something for them. I told Jim, 'Boy, if I was only 35 years old and had about three strong fellows we'd really fix this place up!' "

Like a durum wheat farm. Or a mosque in North Dakota buried in a basement under alfalfa . . .

"There's where that dirty pup of a cop lives, the one who gave me a ticket last week when I was in the car wreck," Charlie nods as he drives his maroon Dodge.

This is the *griot* of Stanley, North Dakota, to use Alex Haley's term for the walking archive that knew the history of his African tribe in The Gambia and could recite it generation after generation. Charlie pulls a story like a shingle off every rooftop he passes.

"Here's the owner of the electric company's house, here's the high school football coach's place, here's where my daughter and her husband live (he has two daughters and a son. One son died at 39). There's the retirement home—50 beds. Here's Joe Peterson's place, one of the old Norwegian farmers who moved in from out of town when he retired. All the old farmers move into Stanley when they get old. There's the Lutheran church where all the Arabs go now. Except Omar. He doesn't go anywhere.

Charlie aims the Dodge toward Ross, where there's the big annual grain elevators' stockholders banquet today. He wants to drop in. Along Route 80 he points to an old homestead that pumped fresh water from a spring. "People still get springwater from them, cause our own city water tastes like iron," he relates. "A lot of people use purifiers."

Past a bar in Ross he bought back in 1953 to bail out a friend who was going through foreclosure, the Dodge kicks up dust in a haphazard lot around a corrugated aluminum hall.

When Charlie walks in, many of the hundreds of white- and blond-capped waves of hair look up. It is as if he were a shadow from an old oak; smile or not, he is the darkest face in the hall and people note that fact looking up, silently, then begin buzzing again and spooning the heaps of mashed potatoes and gravy and spearing the beef. It is not an unfriendly beat; it is an apperception of difference. The dark young visitor by the old man's side doesn't help, though. People don't normally tourist in Ross!

Charlie greets Morris Ludwig, manager of the Ross Farmers Elevator

Company: "This here man's been doing a good job since I picked him up 25 years ago." Charlie was a Board member of the Elevators' Directors back then. Ludwig is a company man. He hasn't attained the audacity of age and its privileges, nor is he a native of Ross. Wooed from the Big City (Fargo) to Mountrail County, his hair is combed perfectly, short-sleeved white shirt pressed perfectly, and his greeting is quiet, perfectly. Competent. Brings $2.6 million from the 50,000 bushels of grain in the Ross elevators (which have been expanding into new silos to store the excess wheat that no one is eating). All for the 600 stockholders in the elevator who are eating profusely while their fields lie fallow.

What a distance this is from the world portrayed in *Northern Light*, a black-and-white cult movie dealing with the embittered, impoverished Nordic farmers in the '20s who were being crushed by bad winters and profiteering grain dealers in Minneapolis. The locale of the movie is exactly the northwest quadrant of North Dakota.

American farmers' first love affair with the socialist Eugene Debs is documented in the film as the farmers banded together to form their first union. Charlie notes there was resistance to the union then, but finally everyone joined, even the Syrians.

The GTA (Grain Elevators Association) is the legacy of *Northern Light*, and the prosperity it celebrates jumps out in full-color photos of farm life contained in a commemorative book at the Ross meeting. The text is a tribute to the high plains farmers' mix of community and lone grit:

"Farming is one of the purest forms of free enterprise. The land is a proving ground, for the farmers are bold business risk takers, who take winning in stride. And accept losses philosophically. They are America's first and foremost environmentalists. Respecters of nature and protectors of the land. They are a rarity among high achievers: driven more by heart than ego. And have more to say for themselves, with less time to talk than anyone else."

It is published in the Reagan era, not that of Eugene Debs.

By now Charlie is really mixing. He zigs like a bumblebee towards three ladies whose white hair has an aura of honey. "Gals," he proclaims, "I'm a Finlander." They laugh and hold tight to their plates of potatoes and gravy.

Charlie and visitor get in line to get some food. Ahead is a glum lady with baggy arms. "There's a gal who's 75. She used to sit in front of me at grade school. She says I used to dip her pigtails in the inkwell!!" Later, Charlie will point out that the Ross schoolhouse has become yet another grain elevator.

At table, the very picture of Lutheran suspicion and forebearance bursts like a dandelion in a fast breeze when Charlie asks about her children. Her name is Mrs. Shroteek. She bends over before leaving to shake the newcomber's hand and underlines, "We love Syrians. They work hard. I'm a Norwegian, you know. We're all together now and that's good."

Toe-headed kids are getting antsy. More coffee. Seconds. Thirds. Charlie wants to leave before the speeches start—he's heard them all before anyway, and it's getting dimmer out. People wave goodbye as he passes. A giant farmer who traces his family back to Prague lets out a hoot when he sees Charlie and goes into a spiel about the price of wheat. It's $3.75 a bushel now, better than $2.25 which it was for most of the recession, but we still need a buck more, closer to five bucks a bushel to be fair. Tell that to Washington. They forgot us out here.

He stabs Charlie with a finger in the chest as they shake hands. "You know, Charlie, I wonder what ever happened to that musique you all had? Member? Darnedest tale I ever heard, a musique in North Dakota. What ever happened to that musique?"

There's no more music at the mew-zeek.

Only the wind.

Under the arc of a crescent moon and star—welded in steel tubing—Charlie struggles with the gate to the Muslim cemetery in Ross. The wind is blowing.

PHOTO GREGORY ORFALEA

The entrance to the Muslim cemetery is framed by an arch of steel tubing that bears the star and crescent. The darkened patch of grass on the right was the site of America's first mosque.

The wind that grows by afternoon. It seems to hollow out everything. It cannot be "canned" as it is, this wind, for a movie soundtrack. It seems to say: Summer is shorter than memory. Take this coolness from the sloughs. Take heed before your life faces its final barbed wire; you have not done what you wanted to do.

The wind is blowing. The tall grass waving like the hair of a beautiful cousin who went away. Charlie clanks off the lock to the gate and silently moves it open on a field of poorly-tended graves. Beyond, the cold slough ripples.

"That's where the jami'ah was." He points to a large, dark patch of bending grass. A mermaid sank here, Charlie, the wind is saying. She had long green hair and came up from the Barada River that runs through Damascus. She swam across the oceans up the Missouri River and sank. Her hair is not lime-green like the rest. Dark-green.

The Syrians still pay a man $50 a year to mow the turf of the cemetery. He must be on strike.

"I used to herd cattle where this cemetery is," Charlie says, looking at a collapsed corral. "Even before that."

The 1939 Historic Society account of the mosque went as follows:

"This basement church is 18 x 30 feet in size and rises four feet off the ground. The walls are built of cement and rock and the roof is temporary. It has four windows on each side and two on each end. The cash cost of the church was $400, and members did considerable work themselves. It was dedicated on Oct. 31, 1930. Furnishings of the church consist of chairs, benches, a large rug, a coal heater and and range. Members bring their own rugs for use in worshipping."

It never occurred to the writer to use any other word than "church" to describe the mosque. Interestingly, "Mohammedanism," as it is called in the account, is found to favor "neither 'Capitalism' nor 'Bolshelvism' " and "prohibits the giving and taking of interest, since it promotes Capitalism and is the cause of the continuation of wars." In short, the writer has both praised and punished, nudging the Ross Syrians closer to the Bolshevik label while proclaiming it favors neither.

The oldest grave in the little cemetery is marked by a white-painted cinderblock, nothing more. Someone crudely scrawled in a two-foot strip of cement, SOLOMON HODGE, D. 1940. Hodge was the first Syrian peddler in the area and the only one to keep it up as a profession. A cheery man whose wife and kids were cut off in Syria from him all his life, Hodge has a name probably derived from *hajj*, indicating a Muslim who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

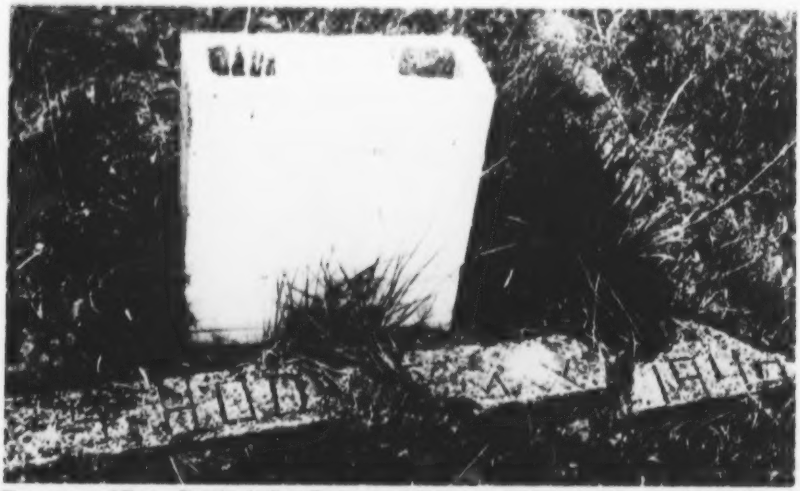
PHOTO: GREGORY ORFALEA

The grave of Ross-Stanley's first Syrian peddler is crudely marked by a painted cinder-block and a concrete strip.

Many of the graves have a crude hump of concrete on them, like a stifling coverlet, but no marker. He points one out—it is his father in an unmarked grave. No, the custom is not Islamic. Charlie doesn't know why it was done this way. Only two headstones in the cemetery have the star and crescent motif etched into them. On some graves the earth is buckled as if the dead were restless. Grass overgrows most, gopher holes abound and no grave has fresh flowers.

Charlie calls off the names as he walks: OSMAN, OMAR, JUMA, HASSAN. ALEX ASMEL, D. 1941. A private in the 158th Infantry, 40th Division. A Muslim Arab American killed in World War II fighting for the U.S. BELINDA OSMAN HUDSON. "She remarried a goddamn drunk."

"Here's little Alex Hassan," Charlie nods over a small stone the size of a common brick. "He died at the age of one. An infant. Richard Hassan was his father, but he died. He has relatives living in Detroit (the largest colony of Arab Americans at 200,000). But his older brothers there don't even know about him. I called them up and told them they had a baby brother."

"Goddamnit!" Charlie shouts, flinging a bear claw at the ground. "I'm the one that does all the dirty work! I make the calls. I get people together for the Eid. When I die, who is going to remember Alex?"

The gate shuts. The rain-filled clouds move in a steel stencil of an

Islamic moon. On the way back to Stanley, Charlie stops in the well-kept Lutheran cemetery where the graves all have headstones, are equally spaced, where the grass is watered and cut and flowers, fake or not, present. He points out his wife, Mary's, grave and his own place beside her, waiting. But why is his own family's selected spot here and not in Ross at the Muslim grounds?

Without a hitch he replies, "It's more livable."

The sun is setting on the old Juma homestead. Nine quarters in size (a quarter equals 160 acres) of barley, durum wheat, flax and oats, as well as cattle, Charlie sold it all to his son, Charles Junior, who built a new house a mile up the road. The old Juma farmhouse is boarded up. For Charlie and many old farmers the days of the combine are over; the days of combining are not. They move, like refugees from solitude, into town.

There is a proud stillness that holds the Juma spread. A '40s Ford truck, purple as a hard-shelled beetle, leans into a broken fence. A barn sags down the middle as if it were straddled too long by a heavy rider. It was brought in two huge pieces, Charlie explains, fingering his ear, in 1939 from 25 miles away. There was no timber long enough to move it in one section. It sags from the weight of many snows and its own fault-line. Old hay inside is spotted with oil from dead tools along the floor . . .

What does it take for an American farmer to "make it"? Charlie's father started with one quarter in 1900 and that sufficed. Today two quarters, or 320 acres, is impossible to float a farmer. With good moisture, at least five quarters are needed to make farming a viable business, and Charlie estimates $100,000 up front for suitable equipment.

In North Dakota the life of a farm is often told in tornados. Those that hit, when they did, what they took with them. Farmers tell of tornados like you would mark the scars on the body to show where you have lived the most.

Tornados According To Charlie: "It forms the cloud in the sky and comes down. It's a dark black cloud. And when it hits it's just like a snake, dips down and goes up, turning and jumping."

In 1950, there was a bad tornado in Ross. In 1962, Charlie and his wife were visiting a daughter in Texas. In the middle of the night his wife woke up in bed and said, "Something's happened to our farm. There's water, raining." The dream was prophetic—a twister had touched down on the Juma barn and pulled the top off like the cap from a bald man. The walls collasped. Charlie describes it:

""Rosie (daughter) was there doing the milk cows while we were away.

She had just got up to the house with the milk when the tornado come and took the barn and the lean on the east side. Neighbors to the east, Alan Kincannon, had a couple of milk cows and she was supposed to go over there and milk Kincannon's cows. But she didn't go. Later two boys in a tractor out on the road got killed from a car accident with the tornado dipping and jumping."

The most recent tornado in the area was in 1979—right on the Fourth of July. The twister took the air-conditioner off the roof of Rosie's trailer house and twirled the kids who were sleeping in a tent. "It scared the devil out of them," Charlie recounts. "Then it crossed the crick to the northwest of us and took two, three trailers down."

But the worst tornado of the century in the Dakotas struck 20 miles south of Ross at the Missouri River. It is a legend, dated 1935.

"It struck across the river at Charleston I guess. They found a pair of pants that had a flat iron in the pocket and the pants was hanging on the fence. It took buildings all the way across the river. Just sucked the water out of the river so they could see the bare ground. Then it took a schoolhouse on the north side, went up, oh, several miles and struck the damn farm. They hid or run away, I can't remember what. Then it went a little ways further and the kids was in the pasture bringing in some milk cows. The father went after them with a pickup. But that didn't help. It took him and the two kids.

"It came back up by Ross and there was a fellow standing in his little farmhouse, in the door. Another farmer came with a team and wagon and said, 'You better hurry up. There's a storm coming.' Not knowing it was going to be a tornado. And by golly, the tornado took him, shack and all. Killed him. Then it went across to Bert Olson's—they just picked up and left, turned the cows out and went north to a neighbor's. And when they got there, the tornado was getting closer. They parked their car alongside the house—the Myers'—and went over a little hill the two families did. Pretty soon the tornado took the roof off the house and drove the car by the house down through the barn.

"Of course, Kemper Olson's sister was small and the wind started pulling her. This Ernie Myers, he pulled her and laid on top of her. It brought a cook stove from some place and they never did know where from, landed it right out there in that area behind the hill. Then it hit a quarter mile to where Mrs. Bert Olson's father was living by himself. And it took him and his shack. Then it went about a mile and a half to Emma Bodkin's place. Sucked all the windows out of their house and took the barn, see. It took the thresher machine and wrapped it around the building and piled it up in the pasture. At the Kinsley farm another mile and a half it took the buildings, and wrapped a dog in the fencing wire. "Then it took mail from Ernest Myers' farm clear up into Canada, about a hundred miles. They mailed the letters back to us from Canada."

Did the Syrians—who surely would never have seen anything like them—react in any special way to tornados?

"They would say—a gift of God, you know," Charlie mused. "It's the doings of God. It shows what power God has. Not Christ, not Jesus, not Mohammed, nobody but the good Lord. He dips down and He does what He wants."

Near the Juma farmhouse two rusted children's swings dangle from their chains as if pulled by the tall green grass. Each seat hangs from a single chain. The tornado of time has been through here . . .

Charlie picks up an iron pole and points to where the cow pastures were, the chicken coop. He knocks an old cultivator, a seeder, a combine. He runs the pole through the grass, so green because of two years of heavy snowfall.

The real loss for Charlie—beyond ancestral ways—is that of his first-born son, Hassan, who died at 39 in 1970. A wallet photo shows Hassan winsome, fairer-skinned than the father, a Steve Garvey face.

"Hassan and Charles Junior never were scared of work," he says. "They used to combine for other people. They had a lot of friends. Hassan died in spring work. The neighbors helped us put in our crop. And you should have seen the Lutheran Church. More people at his funeral outside than inside. Four ministers—two Lutheran, a Catholic, a Presbyterian."

He will say it many times in many places over a few days, but the most expression he will allow himself is: "Hassan's death was a letdown."

Up at the new spread, Charles Junior is washing off some garden tools in front of his house. He's a burly, friendly fellow who once was knifed in a bar by a guy who teased him by swiping his cap. Charles Junior pursued, took the cap back. The fellow swung. Charles wrestled him with a bear hug and then felt a cold draft in his stomach. "He thought it was a bottle opener," Charlie recounts. But it was a knife. And guess who watched the entire battle, blood and all? Omar Hamdan, downing a tall one at the bar.

Charles Junior catapulted his father's land to a fortune and now has 250 head of cattle. A glance into a giant storage building unveils a show-room of modern transporation, every kind of moving vehicle a North Dakotan farmer would want and then some—the huge cultivator with twin grain drills that rolls grain out into the field from a 28-foot span. A hay baler red as a fire engine. A Winnebago. A three-wheeler motorbike, and a motorcycle, both used instead of the legendary cowboy horse to inspect cattle. Three large-sized cars. A boat. Even a bicycle. All parked on a hard dirt floor.

Outside a sprinkler is stuck and shoots water at an old metal forge. Charlie tells his son to move it, he's wasting water and rusting the forge. Charles Junior doesn't move it. Charles Junior hasn't much to say. He has three kids. The visitor may as well be a crow. Nod the head and wait for him to fly away from the cornfield.

The visitor would like to take pictures before it rains.

Charlie slaps him on the back. Harder than just pals.

"Well, sir, I'm gonna throw you out of North Dakota if you speak against the rain."

Saturday night has finally blown in and that means one thing for everyone who isn't a teenager—the bar at the American Legion. There Charles Junior is tending bar and says not three words to the old man, but raises his hand in a shy salute to both him and his city slicker sidekick. Charlie orders a "small guy" and settles in with a couple with are downing Scotches near the blackjack table.

These pillars of the community are a little soggy. The husband, a wealthy, square-shouldered, trim-lipped Norwegian slurs his words as he tells a few Indian jokes. The Indians—Mandan and Sioux—are hated in the Dakotas, especially since Russell Means' AIM re-captured Wounded Knee, South Dakota in the '70s. Even the placid Indians of North Dakota got rowdy and uppity for a few weeks. The largest reservation in the state is 20 miles south of Stanley—Fort Berthold—straddling Lake Sakakawea. Other reservations are Turtle Mountain, parts of Standing Rock and Sisseton which overlap with South Dakota. Devil's Lake reservation is the site of the North Dakotan Syrians' annual picnic, or *mahrajan*.

"It's the ones with only a quarter Indian blood or less who get themselves college degrees and get angry that're the problem," the farmer slurs with shiny, thin lips. He calls for another round. "The worse Indians are these half-breeds that have to prove they're Indian."

The farmer's wife, a state representative, lets him do his racist bit then pipes up about Boys Town in Nebraska, a charity she has always given to until recently because, "They're bringing in too many New York City boys there and squeezing out the locals." The same thing is happening with a small Boys Town in North Dakota, where orphans from the East crowd homeless Dakotans. She's fed up with it. Order another round.

Charlie takes it stoically, saying little. Perhaps he hears the ring of Black Syrian in his ears. But he shifts the topic to the weather and his visitor's business of writing a story. When it is revealed that the visitor is from Washington, D.C., the local legislator really turns on. A little anti-nuke prattle ensues. "I'm gonna like this guy," she smiles, revealing sizable incisors. They are not sharp, but large.

And who's dealing at the blackjack table ($2 limit on bets, no insurance) but another Charley! This one is a sunburned Swede with squared jaw perfectly outlined by a trimmed white beard. He chats easily with the players, seems sorry to win over the farmers' wives who are throwing away savings while the government pays them in wheat not to farm. Charley deals from a "boot", fanning the cards around the horn under his palm. He drinks while dealing, the residue of a boy in his blue eyes. Why is it Charlies are always the fall guys, the dependable, usable ones? The town's silent consciences, the men apart but also so inside things they seem invisible, part of the fabric of the street, landmarks, roadmaps, weather-vanes, goof-offs, jokesters, forecasters, counselors, rocks of Gibralter, pebbles, Charley horses, Charlies . . .

It is midnight. Charlie Juma offers the visitor his bed in Arab custom. He will gladly sleep on the floor or couch. The visitor refuses and falls on the divan in the living room, a few small guys in his stomach. The rain comes in the night, as does Charlie's niece, Dawn, back from a late movie at the town's one cinema.

The next morning is Sunday—visiting time. Charlie's driving. A jeep speeds by.

"That fella is going like a house a-fire."

First there's Mrs. Andreeson on Main Street who tells Charlie she met him many years ago.

"You're a hundred years old?" he holds her hand and blinks the eye. She laughs.

A group of three women in their 60s is up ahead. Charlie used to ride them to school in his horse-drawn sledge over the snow. Now they're in white shorts and thongs.

"By God, girls, when are you gonna put your clothes on?"

For a moment cackles turn to giggles and they go into Sally's Cafe with blushing wrinkles.

"Now I couldn't do that in Minot or Washington, D.C., could I?" Charlie pronounces. "There's an advantage to being in a small town. You know how to talk to everybody. You know what they like and what they dislike." Ah, the Levantine diplomat! The walking bridge! The impresario of human relations who left his homeland in smoking ruins . . .

When asked how a Muslim puts up with women wearing such scant clothes in America, Charlie scoffs, "Bikinis in public, eh? But it's a free country. Who's gonna stop you if you show the 'teez?' " And what about his running a bar in Ross, as a Muslim? "I admit it. I broke the rules."

His daughter, Rosie, wants us for dinner and Nazira—the oldest Arab woman in town—for supper. So at noon it's off to Rosie's.

Aromas of *koosa, kibbeh* and *waraq'inab* (grape leaves) rise in a little kitchen surrounded by farms. Rosie is a widow; her only child, Will, wears a John Deere tractor hat. Like the rest of Charlie's children, she married a non-Arab. In fact, no surviving second or third generation Syrian in the two small towns is married to a Syrian.

Snow is caught in her black hair. Rosie lifts the plates of steaming food with strong arms and a gentle voice. "I find smeed at our grocery store for kibbeh," she says. As for olives, the Greek owner of a market outside Stanley gets them every other month. Arabic bread? In North Dakota it is called "Syrian flatbread," a takeoff on Norwegian flatbread.

Rosie tells a story of a Norwegian couple who tried to make flatbread Syrian-style (more body, butter, and a higher rise). "They were stretching and pulling at that dough from both sides like it was a bedspread! Impossible! Finally, my mother arrived and the Norwegian lady threw the dough down in a huff and said, 'Okay. You finish it.' "

Red zoom, a sauce, is poured over koosa; steam jumps like a genie around the table. "Zoom, zoom, zoom!" Arab kids sing at table and it means "More juice of the zucchini!" The grape leaves roll off into the plate like green cigars.

Dawn is here. She lives with her grandad until her family's move to Nebraska is complete. With fair skin, brown eyes and hair, she talks with pleasure of participating each year in the local Norsehoostafest, the Norwegian festival. She is in her second year at Minot State. She laughs in telling of a fellow "half-breed" who asserts she's "half-Syrian, half crazy!"

Talk goes around the table like a bottomless dish. The only restaurant in the area that serves Arab food is in Williston. It is called, the Viking! Oh, the weddings, says Charlie, were great for dancing the dabkeh. Omar Hamdan's father was especially good at dancing with a handkerchief wrapped in his palm. "He was light on his feet after he got drunk," Charlie drops.

Screwing up her forehead and staring off out the window, Dawn comes to the conclusion that she has never seen an Arab dance, and she notes, in all seriousness, "Except, you know, Fiddler on the Roof." Astonishingly, no one corrects her. No one seems to know that the famous play she refers to is about persecuted Jews in Russia.

Dawn excuses herself—has to be off at work—clerking at a drugstore. She hopes the visitor will try a whirl-a-whip downtown, the favorite local treat. It is ice cream osterized with any fresh fruit you want. "I prefer

Syrian food," she concludes, wiping her lips. "Swede food is too sweet and rich, but Mom can make both."

Thank you to Rosie when all leave—she returns with the Nordic long O's in her slow cadenced speech, "Yoor very welcoom." The Syrians, like everyone else in this time, say *nooze* for *news*, and *aboot* for *about*.

Out front, what is this rusted old tub in the midst of Rosie's marigolds? It was used to scald pigs, she says. After that, the old Syrian farmers would clean out the bristle and dregs of pig and use the tub to soak smeed for kibbeh.

It may have been the only lamb around with an aftertaste of pork!

At Nazira Kurdi Omar's trailer the kibbeh is plain and the Syrian bread flaky and too thin, like the Norwegian. But she spouts flocks of language, birds with damaged wings, in broken Syrian and English and you have to love her. Born in Birey, Syria in 1908 or 1912, she can't remember which, Nazira is delighted to have company since her seven children are all gone, one as far away as Anchorage, Alaska. She wears thick glasses, her face rubbery with deep rills.

Charlie respects Nazira and lets her talk in the hopes her Arabic will spear some of the emotion flying out so fast. We have been warned by Dawn that few people can understand Nazira, who never studied English or Arabic and simply raised seven kids in a strange country. Her husband,

PHOTO: NAZIRA OMAR COLLECTION

Left: Syrian immigrants Sam Omar and Nazira Kurdi Omar with their daughter Fatmeh, one of seven children raised in the U.S. Below: Nazira Kurdi Omar, last surviving original immigrant to Stanley-Ross, poses outside her trailer home with Charlie Juma, first born to the colony.

PHOTO: GREGORY ORFALEA

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*al yeerhamu,* died young, (in 1956), a sickly man. Her bird-like voice is not loud, and many times she ends a thought with an "I don't know anyway."

An innocent at 81 or 75, Nazira is the only remaining member of the Syrian community to refuse to go to the Lutheran Church on principle. There is no more mosque, she rubs the welling of water from her eyes. So I will go nowhere else.

After many rounds of food that seem drained of spice and piquancy by the long winters and her loneliness, Nazira pronounces with untypical clarity, "I want to be myself, not anybody else."

Anyway.

Omar knocks at Charlie's door, darkening the screen. The showdown at last.

Omar's eyes are red and he does not take off his hunter's cap, but tips it. Charlie smiles, does not shake his hand, feints a blow to Omar's belly. It is play with tension behind it.

Perhaps Omar has been drinking, but it is also possible that the capillaries of his eyes are swollen from pollen or dust from fallow farming. Maybe he has not slept since he heard there was someone in town concerned about the history of the Syrians in Ross. Charlie's eyes, however, are as clear as crystal, the whites white as ivory.

Small talk. The men test each other. Omar, 54, son of Abdul Karim Hamdan from Rafid, Syria, a town a few miles from Birey, from where most of the Syrians in the area originate. Omar is a Rafidi. A man already apart. Life in Rafid, like Birey, was poor.

"My father told me if a boy got a toy pistol over there it was as good as a Cadillac here," Omar murmurs.

Omar mentions the bind he's in with the government's pay-off system of wheat for laying off work: "We give enough in taxes don't we? The government has to use all these taxes somehow, so they'll examine the sex life of flies in Argentina if they have to." He's got it out for Argentina, which has been stealing a lot of North Dakota's international grain markets.

He speaks without moving his long, brown hand, palm down, from the table. A derringer there?

Charlie puts on coffee to break the silence after Omar has spoken of the sex life of flies. He makes a couple of calls to others and tells them Omar's here; no one else comes. It seems to be their first meeting in a long while.

The coffee boils over. Charlie's left eye is clear, but twitching a mile a minute. Omar's is red, looking downward. The coffee is poured.

"Yeah, seem to recall a lawnmower catching fire the last service out at the old mosque," he puts forward in his low, dark voice. "Poured too much gas. Burned the thing to a crisp."

When was this?

"1969, wasn't it, Charlie? The year before Hassan died, right?"

Charlie says something unintelligible.

The visitor would like him to explain the mystery as to why he destroyed the mosque.

". . . Our information here is so slack that everybody around the world knows it was the first and we don't," he says, midstream in a thought. "So we put it underneath."

"Put it underneath, under the table," Charlie drones, caught by Omar's "we."

"Yeah, we sorta covered it up. It was kind of a sore eye for many years and of course there wasn't enough in the congregation to . . . you know, keep it up. So it looked kinda bad. Deteriorating. And the windows were boarded up. And the cellar was a sump hole."

Silence. Charlie's arms folded.

"I found out I was the most unpopular one of the whole works, see after this came up. Now my uncle told me that his daughter had already read in one of the books that that was a historic church and he tried to tell me and I wouldn't listen. Now, I don't remember him trying to tell me that."

More silence. Like that which called you to prayer. There was no *muezzin* in the minaret then. There were so very few who could lead a service at all. Only the Dakotan wind called to prayer on Friday.

"It's an awful strict religion," Omar continues. "That's why it's tough for kids to follow in a country where there is freedom. There's no way I'm going to send my kids to the religion I was brought up on. Heck, I'm not . . .if fact, if I was to say I was religious, it would be a disgrace to my religion, really."

"That's what kinda discouraged us a little bit . . . the fact that the religion was so strict and yet nobody really followed it. It's like the Christians—go to church and get their sins forgiven and then start off Monday morning again. Give them hell, you see."

Omar breaks a sly smile, then goes back to his studied expressionlessness.

Is this where Charlie throws his haymaker right?

No.

Because Omar begins reciting the Koran. Yes, he remembers a passage, a favorite.

"Great God, the Savior of the World, Most Gracious and Most Merciful Master on the Day of Judgement. Thee We do Worship and

Thine Aid We Seek. Show Us the Straight Way . . . "

As Omar recites, Charlie's eye stops twitching. He is stunned. Then Omar begins telling about a Bengali missionary from India who "fascinated the heck out of me." Apparently, the fellow rented out the theater for preaching, spoke six languages, and wowed 'em in Ross when he prayed for rain for the community during the drought in the late '30s. On a day without a cloud, he prayed fervently with all the Syrians and by afternoon it poured.

"I didn't know about it being the first mosque in America," Omar admits, with the first hint of remorse. "If I did maybe I wouldn't have done it."

"He dozed it," Charlie speaks quietly.

"If they're talkin' about building a new one, okay. That's fine, or maybe a historical plaque or something. But the way it was, with rats and gophers . . ."

"Omar," Charlie stands. "Who's gonna do this when I'm gone?" On the table before him are piles of old photos of the Syrians in the Dakotas, articles for the North Dakota Historical Society, plaques and presentations in Arabic. But he is facing a loner. He is pleading with him with emotions cooled by 80 years in the northern zone. There is no flailing of the hands. Only the eye twitching again.

It is strange. In a pang of sympathy, Charlie reaches out to the prodigal son.

"It'll have to be someone from the outside that gets us movin' on a historical site, someone from Bismark or Grand Forks," Omar sidesteps. "Say, you know how to cook them dried chick peas, the domie nuts? I'd like to try and find out how to do that." The visitor promises to send a cookbook.

A quiet settles on the Juma house, bought by a retired farmer whose father came from Syria in 1899 and bowed his head to the East calling *Allahu Akbar* in the wheat. It may be that Omar remembers that call, packed deeper inside him than anyone. Contrary to the obvious, Omar bulldozed the mosque not to slap Allah in the face, but to hurt the community into realizing what its lassitude had done to their customs. Omar shocked the Muslims of Ross and Stanley. He was punishing them, and therefore himself, for not praying five times a day and not keeping the faith, and not inculcating enough steel resolve to resist the tide of Norsehoostefests and the ever-loving English. He was punishing himself for wanting the blue-eyed girl in the bathing suit of the movies and billboards that never stops coming at you in America. Omar, in his heretic way, suffered from a hunger for meaning and righteousness. His violent act reducing the jami'ah to dust may have been his most ardent act of faith since childhood. God, you deserve better, he seemed to be saying over the roar of his plough. Better than us. Better than this. Better than me.

As for Charlie, a more devout and temperate man whose father founded the mosque, he will be put to rest in the Lutheran cemetery because it's more livable. He has fought the good fight, but because fate is against the Syrians in Ross, and the Lutheran church is here to stay and its grass is well-trimmed, he sides with the inevitable. Why, after all, had he left his father's grave unmarked all these years? Was this devotion to the Muslim ways? He will complain about gophers digging holes in the Muslim graves, but Omar—the recondite—will be the one to poison them.

Just who felt the passing of an era more, who was the assimilationist and who the keeper of the flame, is not so easy to tell. What is not difficult to surmise, however, is that by the year 2000 there will be only one Syrian farmer left in Stanley-Ross. His children may read about mosques in books, but that is all. His name will be Charles Juma Junior. He will drive a Winnebago. And know no Arabic. ◆

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The Mosque on the Prairie in Ross, North Dakota, 1929 - 1978.

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PHOTO: DETROIT PUBLISHING COMPANY, 1906

The Mississippi River town of Vicksburg became an *entrepot* for the South's prodigious cotton market.

# Dabkeh in the Delta

### By Joseph Schechla

Vicksburg, Mississippi is a quintessential southern town. Yet this small river city does not fit the usual image of the deep south, for its population of 25,000 includes the descendants of immigrants from different parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Among them is a proud and widely respected community of Arab-Americans. Their ancestors came to Vicksburg from Lebanon at the turn of the century. This is surprising to people in other parts of the country because ethnic diversity in the United States is too often perceived as a northern, urban phenomenon.

The Irish and Italian communities of Boston, the Poles of south Chicago and the Chinese inhabitants of San Francisco are frequently cited as examples of the American "melting pot." The ethnic character of much of the south, however, has been overlooked by immigration historians, journalists and, consequently, the general public. Even throughout the tumultuous 1960s when national attention was focused on the American south, its racial tensions and the continuing struggle for civil rights, the majority of Americans remained unaware of the colorful diversity that exists beyond the usual impressionistic black and white portrait of the south. Southerners themselves, however, have a different story to tell.

One Arab-American woman recounted her experience growing up in Greenwood, Mississippi, during that period: "We lived in a town where the local record store advertised its Arabic music selection, and where we shopped at the corner Chinese grocery . . . And there we were, sitting around the dinner table, eating kibbeh with our Arabic-speaking grandmother as we watched the national news about the south; but the national perception did not fit our own experience."

The popular perception of the south stands as a shining example of demographic over-simplification. Southern society has been the subject of much generalization, and perhaps little serious study, since the Civil War, but the story of the southern United States with its diverse cultures is now beginning to be told.

Locally prominent minorities in the south continue to be relegated to a position of obscurity by popular misconceptions which persist in the country as a whole. The Arab-Americans of the Mississippi Delta are one example of a relatively unknown ethnic group. Their presence reveals a great deal about how Americans of Arab ethnic heritage, as well as other ethnic groups, have enriched southern society.

In the state of Mississippi, Arab-Americans are found in nearly every sizeable community and some of the smallest rural towns. They are most concentrated in the town of Vicksburg, where they form the largest single ethnic group among post-Civil War immigrants. Vicksburg is the subject of this study.

## *The Setting*

Vicksburg is located at the southern locus of the area popularly known as the Mississippi Delta. This appellation is given to the elliptical stretch of intensely fertile land which extends from just south of Memphis, Tennessee, along the Mississippi River to Vicksburg, and is contained by the loess bluffs which rise to the east of the Yazoo and Tallahatchie Rivers.

The Mississippi Delta near Vicksburg was the home of the indigenous Tunica and Ofogula people, from whom the Spaniards "obtained a land grant" in 1790 to establish an outpost at the site of present-day Vicksburg. This settlement was named Nogales after the walnut trees which grew on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. The Spanish were joined by French traders and explorers who preceded the settlers of English heritage.

The English-speaking settlement at Nogales (Walnut Hills) was the product of the missionary efforts of a Virginia Methodist minister, Newitt Vick, who acquired waterfront property there shortly after establishing a missionary settlement six miles to the east. When the Rev. Vick and his family died of yellow fever in 1819, Vick's son-in-law, John Lane, who was executor of his will, parcelled the land and named the growing settlement after its Anglo-American founder.

Steamboats and overland routes carried settlers from the Carolinas, Kentucky, Virginia and "the uplands" to settle and farm the rich soil of the region. The developing plantation mode of agricultural production was manned by African slave labor brought to the Americas by Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and British slave traders.

The town of Vicksburg soon became an *entrepot* for the prodigious cotton production for which the south has been renowned for more than 150 years.

It is this social composition (minus the dispossessed indigenous population), as well as the south's lingering commitment to agriculture and latent industrialization, that have contributed to current popular misconceptions about southern society. However, much in the way that the north experienced demographic transformation during the post-Civil War Reconstruction, the southern states, too, absorbed waves of new immigrants.

Migration from the Middle East to the Delta is evident in some degree at least as early as the turn of the 19th century, and Arab immigration into the area has already celebrated its centennial. Although Middle Eastern immigrants may have preceded him, the earliest Muslim resident found on record, Benajah Osmun, is listed in the land registry as a property owner already in 1805.[1]

## Arab Origins

The origins of the majority of Vicksburg's Arab-American community can be traced to three areas in what is now the Republic of Lebanon: the northern port city of Tripoli, the village of Bishmizzeen in the Kura region and a cluster of villages located between the towns of Jubayl and Batroun known collectively as al-Qurneh. (See map, p. xxx.) Although Arabs immigrating to some parts of Mississippi were also Muslims and Maronites, most of those who settled in the Vicksburg area came from Greek Orthodox congregations of these regions in what had been known for centuries as the Mount Lebanon district of Syria.[2]

Tripoli (*Tarablus* in Arabic) is Lebanon's second largest urban center and has existed as a city since 359 B.C.[3] The port of Tripoli was a site of trade in ancient as well as modern times. The city grew very little in the 19th century until about 1880, when it experienced a burst of productivity and development that came as it expanded beyond the confines of the Old City to accommodate a growing population that reached 30,000 by 1897.[4] Much of this economic growth was the consequence of new trade in raw materials exported to the industrial west, particularly to France.

Approximately 10 miles to the south of Tripoli stands the largely Greek Orthodox village of Bishmizzeen.[5] This agricultural village of some 40 households hugs the Lebanon foothills overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

Bishmizzeen, too, was undergoing a metamorphosis of its own toward the turn of the century. The American Presbyterian mission, headquartered in Beirut, had been operating educational and medical facilities in Syria since the mid-19th century. Around 1889, the mission opened a second center in Tripoli and began to expand its activities to the villages of the Kura, where a Presbyterian school was opened in Bishmizzeen in 1890. A Protestant teacher native to the village ran the school which introduced new subjects such as English and French to the little village. Knowledge of other languages as well as studies in arithmetic took on growing importance with the development of the village silk export industry.

A combination of factors led to a broadening of vision in the village, while news of other lands and, in particular, the economic potential found in America filtered into the village. The effects were felt in Bishmizzeen and in other Syrian villages as internal and external migration beat a path toward new opportunities. The influence of American missionaries and economic opportunities abroad led to the emigration of 487 of Bishmizzeen's 1,200 residents between 1895 and 1939.[6]

The villages of Munsif, Judayyil, Rihaneh, Shaykhan, Gharzouz, Bukh'az and Burbareh together constitute an area known locally as al-Qurneh, a diminutive of the Arabic *qurn*, meaning knob or hilltop. By far the largest in this constellation of villages is Munsif, whose population is nearly twice that of Judayyil, the next largest among them.[7]

Included in this region is a minority group of Muslims and Maronite Christians; however, this too is a predominantly Greek Orthodox community surrounded by the largely Maronite (Catholic) area of Kisrawan. In 1921, the Kisrawan administrative district, including al-Qurneh, contained a population of 41,004, plus an emigrant population of 14,290, which was counted separately. Of these, 34,395 were Maronite, 2,659 were Shi'a Muslim and virtually all of the 1,010 Greek Orthodox were residing on al-Qurneh. Smaller groups included in this total were 208 Greek Catholics, 200 Sunnite Muslims, 36 Protestants, 128 miscellaneous and 2,368 foreigners.[8]

The origin of the villagers of Munsif has been traced to a Greek Orthodox Syrian named Mansour Jiryis al-Khouri, who founded the village some 15 generations ago. Mansour Jiryis left his native Hawran region (in present day southern Syria) and, after a short sojourn at the ancient city of Ba'albek, settled at the site that became Munsif. There he raised three sons and divided the village among them. Until recently, construction in Munsif followed a pattern of three rows extending westward to the sea from the original village site, suggesting the continual apportionment of village land in keeping with the three lines of descent from Mansour Jiryis.[9] From these sons descended the three maximal lineages of Munsif, one of which is the source of numerous immigrants to Vicksburg, Mississippi.[10] Closely related lines of descent from these Munsifiyeen also extend to Marshall, Texas, and Shreveport, Louisiana, as well as Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Australia.

In the period leading up to World War I (1890-1914), 38 residents left Munsif for foreign destinations, but in the post-war period (1919-1926) only 16 Munsifiyeen emigrated.[11] For most new emigrants from Syria this latter period was punctuated by the end of liberal entry into the United States, when Congress passed the Immigration (Emergency Quota) Act of 1924 limiting immigration to 150,000 immigrants annually, virtually all from northern European countries. After this date, most Syrian emigration was diverted to South America and Australia.

Al-Qurneh is an agricultural region, but contains no springs or streams, and it is still common to find roof reservoirs or semi-subterranean cisterns to collect rainwater in these villages. There is no alluvial soil in the villages; nevertheless, the largely peasant inhabitants of al-Qurneh have managed to raise from this poor soil their traditional crops of olives, figs and grapes. Tobacco is also produced in the region, but the main cash crop until 1914 was silk cocoons, thus mulberry trees—a complement to silkworm production—are also found in abundance.

Villagers of Shaykhan, for example, raised the silkworms along with their other crops and sold the cocoons to middlemen visiting the village, who in turn sold them to representatives of the large textile manufacturers, such as the French textile concerns of Marseilles and Lyons.[12]

The latter half of the 19th century saw significant changes in the economy of Lebanon and the Middle East. Acceding to European pressure, the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid instituted his *tanzeemat* (economic reforms), thus easing some of the restrictions imposed on non-Muslim commercial activity in the empire and appeasing foreign and minority business interests throughout the Middle East. At the same time, infant mortality and epidemic diseases were on the decline as formerly fatal illnesses were under control toward the end of Ottoman rule. The country's population count and the economic quality of life for some were on the upswing.

In an already over-populated country,[13] residents of the Mount Lebanon region in Syria learned to cope with finite resources, of which land was a primary example. The traditional bequest of the family landholdings to the first-born son left the now larger families with a cruel dilemma: to bequeath the family plot to the eldest son and leave nothing for the younger siblings, or to fragment such landholdings among them into tiny, uneconomical plots. Alternatively, the family might send the younger sons to find their livelihood outside the village.

With the emergence of a monetarized economy in Syria at the end of 19th century, the latter alternative spurred a considerable internal migration in Syria and Palestine, as well as emigration to further points in the Americas, West Africa and Australia. Between 1860 and 1900 an estimated 120,000 Syrians left their homeland to seek fortunes elsewhere; and 15,000 emigrated annually until war engulfed the eastern Mediterranean in 1914.[14] Emigrants from the Mount Lebanon region and their families now constitute a number greater than the current population of the Republic of Lebanon itself.

America already had a reputation as a place where one could find opportunities for advancement. Others from Syria had succeeded, and news of their success reached Tripoli and the villages of al-Qurneh and Bishmizzeen. Before 1900, what is known as chain migration took place from the Levant to the Americas as entire families emigrated together, encouraged by a relative who preceded them. Commercial endeavors in the *mahjar* (the land of emigration in Arabic) promised to launch the immigrant into life with the needed income to eventually marry and raise a family back home. In the meantime, sons and daughters abroad could serve as a source of remittances to the family back home in those times of crisis, which were soon to come. This way emigration was a quest not only for self-improvement, but a promise also to improve life for the people left behind.

## *The Pioneers*

The history of Arab emigration from these regions to Vicksburg begins with a man named Elias Naseef Fattouh. This emigrant was the eldest son of Naseef Fattouh of Munsif, and was a young man known for his earthy sense of humor and his "colorful" vocabulary. In the year 1884, Elias was bound for America, where he planned to work as a peddler for a few years and earn enough money to return to Lebanon and settle into family life there.

Back in Munsif, Elias heard the tales of earlier travelers who had come to America, but he knew no one in that new land and spoke no English. Nevertheless, he ventured alone to the port of New Orleans.

Elias realized his first task was to make contact with other Syrians at his destination. Upon disembarking in New Orleans, Elias devised a way to attract the attention of any Syrian within earshot. While standing on the dock, he began to cry out a word familiar to all his compatriots: "*Kibbeh, kibbeh, kibbeh* . . . "

Within a short time, a Syrian merchant who happened to be at the docks heard Elias' cry and approached him. This passerby offered Elias an opportunity to peddle merchandise in the local countryside, and he was soon on his way with a suitcase full of goods to be sold in the hamlets and farms of the Louisiana and Mississippi countryside. His route took him on foot along the Mississippi River northward from New Orleans.

Peddling in the late 19th century rural south was tiring, lonely, difficult work, and life in rural Mississippi was a world removed from the experience of the Syrian villager. However, like many other immigrants, Elias was a hard worker and he managed to build up his savings, as well as a reputation as a good businessman. In a few short years, Elias was able to acquire credit to open his own dry goods store in Hermanville, Mississippi. Elias Naseef Fattouh's settlement in Hermanville was the first step in Syrian immigration to the area and the eventual convergence of Syrian-Americans at Vicksburg, 30 miles to the north.

PHOTO NORMAN NASIF COLLECTION

Ameen Nasif (Fattouh), Vicksburg's first Arab immigrant, returned to Munsif in 1892 to marry Dibi Niqoula 'Awad. The two are pictured above in this 1900 snapshot.

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In 1888, Elias' brother, Ameen, arrived in New Orleans and followed his older brother's footsteps to Hermanville. When Ameen arrived, he discovered that his brother had shortened his name, adopted his middle name (taken from his father) as his last name, and dropped altogether the traditional family name Fattouh. In order that he bear the same name as his brother, Ameen followed suit. Thus, these new immigrant brothers became known as Ellis (Elias also anglicized his given name) and Ameen Nasif, and their descendants, too, carry this as their family name today.

Ameen Naseef Fattouh (now Ameen Nasif) eventually purchased a horse and buggy with which he, too, peddled in the countryside. After three or four years, Ameen obtained enough credit and merchandise from a Jewish department store owner to open his own dry goods store in Port Gibson before eventually settling in Vicksburg, just 27 miles to the north.

Although General Ulysses S. Grant had ordered the destruction of other Mississippi towns during the Civil War, when he came upon Port Gibson he declared it was "too pretty to burn." Syrian immigrants were similarly taken with this village, and it was here that a branch of the Vicksburg Arab-American community first made its home.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Elias Fattouh returned to Lebanon, as was his original plan. Elias left the family business in Port Gibson in the care of James Ellis (Shawan), who had also recently immigrated from the village of Shaykhan (al-Qurneh).

Store fronts in this historic American town still bear the names of the descendants of James Ellis Shaykhani. Port Gibson residents also include relatives of the Audeh family, also of Shaykhan, and the Abrahams of Munsif.

Ameen returned to Munsif in 1892 to marry Dibi Niqoula (Nicola) 'Awad and bring her with him to Vicksburg, where she gave birth to two sons, Milad and Elias. Ameen and Dibi left their two sons with family in Port Gibson and returned to Lebanon in 1904 for what was meant to be a temporary stay in the old country.

Another emigrant ancestor of the Arab-Americans of Vicksburg, Dibi (Adeebeh Musa) Abraham, was just one of many Syrian immigrant women who broke with tradition and worked as peddlers after first arriving in the United States. Dibi traveled alone, leaving her husband and son behind in her native Munsif. Dibi was with child when she left her home to come ahead to the new world. After giving birth, Dibi Musa left her newborn daughter in the care of Catholic nuns in New Orleans on the promise that they would care for her while Dibi peddled in the countryside. When Dibi returned, she was told by the nuns that the baby girl had died, but she never accepted their story and lived with the anguish of not knowing the true fate of her only daughter. Dibi later returned to Syria and brought with her Elias Abraham, her first-born son, from whom descended the numerous Abrahams of Vicksburg who originated in Munsif.

Peddling for a living was a novel departure from the traditional farming activities of village life in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. It was lonely and exhausting work. However, for those lacking capital, skills and a knowledge of English this activity was an opportunity to earn a living without having to endure the long hours and miserable conditions of factory work or the isolation of the homestead. Peddling provided these Syrian immigrants with contacts among the local residents and allowed them to adapt to prevailing social customs and learn the language quickly.

Peddlers carried to the countryside merchandise on their backs or in suitcases. They sold fabrics, lace, soaps and a variety of household items. Peddling brought a good income in those days. One woman recalls that selling merchandise in rural Mississippi earned her $500 in her first Christmas season.[15] But peddling was exhausting work and after acquiring some savings, these immigrants to the Delta often opened their own grocery or dry goods stores.

The Thomas Khoury household was the first Syrian family to settle in Vicksburg in 1887. Thomas and his wife Rosy came to Vicksburg to eventually establish themselves as dry goods merchants, where they opened a shop at 306 Washington Street in the heart of the Vicksburg commercial center. In 1898, Thomas was joined by his brother Abraham (Ibrahim), who lived with the family, which included three American-born children by 1900: Ninny (born 1895), Joe (1896) and Johnny (1899). Thomas Khoury was also the first Syrian in Vicksburg to become a naturalized U.S. citizen, in 1899.[16]

According to census records,[17] Sam'an Musa was the next to come to Vicksburg. Simon Moses, as he became known in America, arrived in the United States in 1888 from Munsif and established himself in the grocery business. By the turn of the century, Simon lived on Farmer Street in Vicksburg with his wife and their two "American" sons, Miller and John. Now an octagenarian, John resides in Marshall, Texas, with his daughter and is the oldest of Vicksburg's first generation of Syrian-Americans.

Kaleel (Khaleel) Jabour was the first in his family to arrive in Mississippi from Tripoli in 1884. His brother John came to Vicksburg in 1896 to live with his elder brother, and by 1910 both were joined by their wives, Marie and Mamie, respectively. Elias Jabour arrived in 1900

PHOTO: DETROIT PUBLISHING CO., 1906

Washington Street is still the center of Vicksburg's commerce. This turn-of-the century scene greeted many an immigrant who came in search of opportunity.

with his wife, Mary, and daughter, Annie. By 1910, the Jabours (then totalling 16) were all established in their own dry goods businesses, forming the precedent for a family tradition.

Today the descendants of these enterprising immigrants operate a variety of popular retail stores on Washington Street in Vicksburg's main shopping district. Also in this downtown commercial center are located family businesses bearing the names Khoury, Abraham and Thomas, and other names, such as Habeeb, Malik and Nosser can be found on storefronts and businesses nearby.

In 1900, five Syrian families were already established in Vicksburg. By the turn of the century, the first American generation had already been born to the Arab community. The Simon Moses, (Sam'an Musa), Thomas Koury (Khoury), Assad Thomas (Tannous), Joseph Maroon and Philip Zahlout families constituted a community of 32 people, including nine American-born children.

The new century was greeted by a Vicksburg Arab immigrant community that was clearly on the increase, and so was the traffic between the Americas and Lebanon. Some Vicksburg immigrants made numerous voyages between Lebanon and the lands of new settlement; and in those days, extended families on both sides of the ocean knew each other, at least vicariously. When John (Hanna) Hajj of Jackson, Mississippi, visited his nephews in Munsif in the early 1930s, he needed no introduction, for his fame preceded him. Uncle John was renown for his 7-foot stature, and Vicksburgers still debate whether his shoe size was, in fact, 15 or 17.

Some Syrians in Vicksburg did not come directly to the Delta, but rather followed opportunities elsewhere before settling in this Mississippi River town. Elias Habeeb and his son, Alex, left Bishmizzeen in 1885 to make two trips to Australia within the following six years. There they peddled and worked at odd jobs, including horse-breaking, in the state of Queensland. Upon returning to Bishmizzeen in 1901, Alex, already in his early 30s, married a local girl and planned to emigrate to Australia. At that time, however, Australian immigration restrictions tightened, and the embassy in Beirut refused an entry visa to Alex's wife, Loretta, because she had a common eye infection. Alternatively, the Habeeb family set out for America and settled in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where a cousin of Alex Habeeb had already immigrated.

Soon Alex Habeeb opened a dry goods store in the small town of Winbar, Pennsylvania. There the first two "American" Habeebs were born. Because one was sickly, their doctor advised they seek a warmer climate and suggested California. But Alex Habeeb preferred to take his family back to Lebanon and the home village of Bishmizzeen. There the young son, Edward, died from pneumonia and measles as the World War I was approaching. The events of the next four years delayed the Habeeb family's return to America until 1920, when they were finally rejoined with cousins already living in Vicksburg.

Ameen Nasif (Fattouh), having left Vicksburg in 1904, had also intended to return again with his family. He was enamored with America and developed such an admiration for its President Theodore Roosevelt (1901 - 1909) that he named his newborn son after him. Roosevelt Fattouh today lives in Beirut.

Ameen's intended return to America would have been his third trip to the Mississippi *mahjar*. However, events and powers much larger than him foiled his plan. Syria was becoming a focus of contention between the controlling Constantinople-based Ottoman Empire and the rival imperial powers of Europe. By the time Ameen could arrange his return to the United States, the Mount Lebanon area was placed under blockade by the Ottomans and severe economic depression gripped the country.

Mikha'il Nosser and Selma Jibra'il of Shaykhan (al-Qurneh) had two children who grew up during the difficult times which afflicted the

Levant during World War I. Mikha'il had come temporarily to America after 1900, but he passed away before returning to his family in Shaykhan. Their son Hanna M. Nosser Shaykhani was just a boy of 10 when Turkish conscription was imposed on Syria in 1908 and just 16 when war broke out.

Hanna (John) Nosser still recalls vividly those days in the old country and the war-time blockade imposed on the Syrian coast. He tells how the villagers were unable to buy the staples of life, and had to extract salt from sea water. Villagers were unable to travel or trade with other communities, and even access to the adjacent sea coast was prohibited by the Ottomans on the chance that the villagers would pass messages in bottles to the allied ships. As a result of the blockade many in Syria died from famine. One survivor recalls:

"In the war we had a tough time. In '17 and '18 we lost 21,000 people from starvation. And I didn't think I was ever gonna make it. That's how bad it was. You'd walk down the road two, three miles you'd find a couple people dead here and yonder. It was terrible—I hate to bring up that kind of memory. But I believe God intended for some people to live so they could come to the outside and tell the world what happened."[18]

The last years of Ottoman rule left bitter memories for that generation who remember their physical suffering. Among Vicksburg's Syrian community are those whose families were lost to starvation during the four-year war, and many attribute Ottoman oppression as their motive for emigration. The villagers in Munsif remember that 100 of their number perished from starvation between 1914-1918.[19]

Hardship did not subside, however, with the signing of the armistice. The same day the armistice was signed, an earthquake hit Lebanon, destroying many homes in the villages of al-Qurneh, Bishmizzeen and Tripoli. For some, this could have been an omen of the man-made violence that was still to come.

Alex Habeeb's son, Alfred, still recalls the early days of French occupation. "As my dear father would say, we were born to hate [the] Turk. But the French were worse. They took everything and gave nothing back."[20]

Hanna Nosser reflects on Shaykhan at the end of World War I and his decision to emigrate to Vicksburg. The Nosser family home was destroyed by the Armistice Day earthquake, and theirs was added to the collective loss of hope. At that point, Hanna wrote his uncle Thomas Nosser, then living on Clay Street in Vicksburg. After explaining the impossible situation in 1918 Syria, John Nosser's family (which included cousins in Port Gibson and Vicksburg from the Farris and

Ellis families) agreed to help him make the passage to America via Marseilles, Paris and Antwerp. When his ship arrived on August 19, 1920, John found a Syrian man processing immigrants at Ellis Island, who helped him on his way to Vicksburg.

For many, the experience of emigration brought mixed feelings. Arriving in Vicksburg for the first time, Hanna (John) Nosser reminisces, "I felt like I was home. Everyone was speaking 'Arabi." But the anxiety of finding oneself in this foreign land was frequently deepened by the uncertainty of the future.

On his first day in Vicksburg, John remembers walking all the way from the 1600 block of Clay Street where it meets Washington Street. Like so many immigrants before him, John Nosser was 8,000 miles from home, unable to speak the language, possessed only what he had on his back, looked down on the Mississippi River flowing lazily below him and talked to God. "You brought me here. It's your responsibility to help me now," he implored. "I just don't know what to do." Until his emigration, John had never been away from home in his life and had not even been in Beirut more than twice in his 22 years. But from the midst of adversity, he came to America. After 65 years John is convinced that his prayer has been answered.

By 1920, some of the Syrians' original culture was already succumbing to the inevitable influences of the American host environment. Arabic was still widely spoken among the old-timers and the Syrian-born newcomers, but the first American-born generation was beginning to assimilate and showed little interest in perpetuating their mother tongue. Nevertheless, one major element of the original culture was institutionalized early in the history of Vicksburg's Arab-American community and has been preserved until this day: the Syrian-rite Orthodox church.

As early as 1900 the Syrian families of Vicksburg founded an organization dedicated to perpetuating their common faith. The cost of building a permanent church and retaining the services of a resident priest was beyond the means of these families at the time. Nevertheless, they set out by forming the "Progressive Aid Society" in 1900. This Society was comprised of 25 members and provided a framework within which the community could work together. All of its members shared the objective of eventually establishing an Orthodox Church that would attend to the spiritual needs of their community.

By 1906, the Progressive Aid Society had gathered enough funds to hire Rev. Macharios al-Saify, a missionary priest who ministered to the Orthodox communities throughout the south. During the next four years, services were held in the homes of various members of the con-

PHOTO VERY REV NICHOLAS SAIKLEY COLLECTION

Members of the St. George Orthodox congregation gathered round Rev. Germanos (center) for this photo in 1917.

gregation until the Syrian community purchased and converted the old Gibson Memorial Methodist Church on South Washington Street. When Saint George Orthodox Church was chartered in 1924, responsibility for administrative matters and providing clergy was assumed by the Archdiocese of North America.

The church then served to embody much of the traditional culture as it was practiced in Syria. This included ministering to the major events of life—birth, death and marriage, but the church also provided a forum for cultural activities such as staging Arabic plays in the early days.

The new church also saw some of the original traditions undergo practical modifications, owing largely to its American setting. Women now participated side-by-side with the men while attending the liturgy. Arab Orthodox congregations (with the exception of the elderly) traditionally remained standing during Mass, and men and women were segregated in the old country. The dates of, and emphasis upon, certain religious feasts were adjusted to coincide with western observance.

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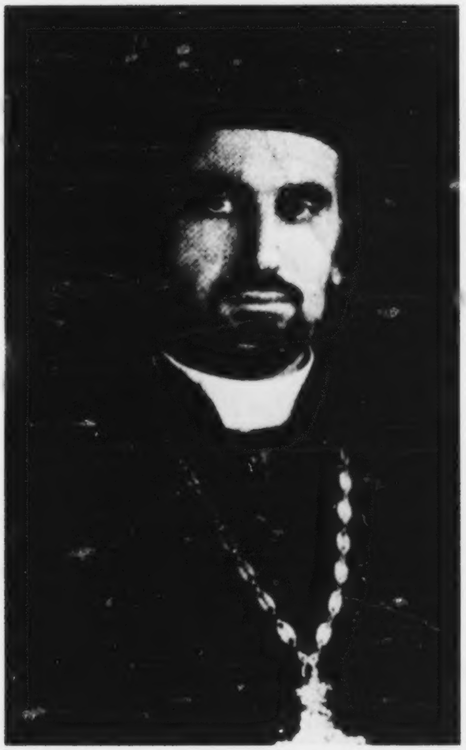
Despite these minor modifications, the church has served as a conspicuous example of the community's continuity. This has been manifested in important and subtle ways. The women of the parish have for decades baked the bread to be consecrated at mass. That is until recent years. The Eucharist bread is now prepared by a commercial bakery, though parishoners confide that it is not quite the same quality as that formerly made by the Syrian-born women of the community.

During the Depression years, the community could not afford to keep a full-time priest. Nevertheless, members of the congregation met regularly in the church basement to discuss matters of their faith. In times of prosperity as well as economic decline, the Orthodox church remained an important cohesive force among the Arab-Americans of Vicksburg.

Within the framework of the Church grew other educational social organizations which served to hold the community together. In 1925, Maled Nasif started the first Orthodox Sunday school in the United States. It was in the 1920s that then pastor Rev. Anthony Bashir pioneered the translation of the traditional Arabic liturgy to English for the Vicksburg congregation. Translating the liturgy into the vernacular helped to integrate new immigrants into the English-speaking environment and encouraged the participation of the second American-born generation in the church. Anthony Bashir went on to establish the Orthodox church at Terre Haute, Indiana, and later was consecrated Archbishop of North America. Today, St. Georges Orthodox Church and its pastor, the Very Reverend Nicholas Saikley, administer to a congregation of approximately 160 families, including some 10 families from the small Greek community in Vicksburg.

The Syrian Girls Club was founded in January 1920, and remains the oldest and most consistent social organization in the Vicksburg community. This club, known since 1931 as the Cedars Ladies Club, is devoted to social service and is renown for its support of local charities through its fund-raising activities. The best known of these is the annual New Years hafleh, which is now held at the Vicksburg Auditorium.

The Arabs of Vicksburg can recall decades of ringing in Ra's al-Sanneh (New Year) with a mixture of American and Syrian traditions. Often local bands played contemporary dance tunes, but during the breaks and after hours celebrants would commemorate their Arab heritage and join in the dabkeh. Music was provided by Arabic musicians from Jackson or New Orleans, or a few of the men from Vicksburg simply would improvise on the darbakkeh (a type of drum).



Rev. Anthony Bashir served the Vicksburg Orthodox congregation during the 1920s. He pioneered the use of English in the liturgy and later became the Metropolitan Archbishop of North America. The legend below the picture reads: "If the grave envelopes me, and the future veils my past, this is my image, picture for those after me as a book contains my soul."

On such occasions when the Syrian community came together, their collective success in the new country, as contrasted with the hardships remembered from the old, gave cause to celebrate.

The Delta was not without its own hardships and natural disasters. The Mississippi River, the economic life-blood of its surrounding communities, has been known to carry a destructive force as well. Vicksburgers had been touched by serious flooding in 1913 and 1922, but Mississippians are still talking about the flood of '27. At that time, tens of thousands of refugees were camped in the Vicksburg area where they were attended to by the Red Cross.[21]

Vicksburg itself was relatively protected from the effects of the flood, owing to its position on the same strategic bluff that attracted the 18th-century Spaniards. Even so, Vicksburgers recall when the river then was lapping up onto Washington Street. They say that during the flood one could fish from downtown Vicksburg or row a boat from

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there to Monroe, Louisiana, 78 miles away to the west! Other towns along the Mississippi, however, suffered considerable loss of life and property in 1927. Greenville was one town that was hardest hit. As in Vicksburg, many in the Syrian community in Greenville were shopowners.

One such family was that of Anees (Ernest) Thomas and Emma Ellis Thomas. The Thomases operated their successful grocery business on Nelson Street in Greenville. They had just stocked a bulk shipment of foodstuffs when the Mississippi overran the levy at Greenville, and flood waters rose to the roof of the Thomas' store. Their business was wiped out. The Thomases then decided to move their family to Vicksburg where they joined Emma's family there. Among those returning to Vicksburg was Emma's youngest brother, John, who had lived with Anees and Emma in Greenville after their father, George Ellis (Shawan), had died in 1925.

The strength of the family ties and community affiliation among the Syrians is evident in times of need, in the *mahjar* as in the *balad* (old country). By relocating to Vicksburg, the Thomases formed a part of the extended Ellis (Shawan) family and were able to benefit from the fellowship of their co-religionists in St. George Orthodox community. In terms of religion, the Vicksburg Arabs differed from those in Greenville, where the majority in that Syrian community were Maronite.

Anees (Thomas) Mafrij had first come to the Delta from Bishmizzeen with his father at the age of 12. There they peddled merchandise and later established a grocery business in Greenville. Before the coming of World War I, Anees' father (Abu Anees), returned to Bishmizzeen to collect the family and bring them to Greenville. The whole family was about to take on not only a new way of life, but also a new name. Thomas was the name of one of the Mafrij family elders and Anees figured it would be a more suitable one in the American society; so the new name stuck.

Emma Ellis' family revised their name by way of an even more arbitrary process. Jeraj Shawan married Rosa Khattoum from Koubeh village, north of Batroun. When the Shawans arrived at Ellis Island in 1900 with their 3-year-old daughter Emma, they took a new name in honor of their first American destination. From Ellis Island, the Ellises eventually planted their new roots in Vicksburg, where they joined the ranks of successful merchants there, many of whom were Syrian immigrants.

For some who kept their family names intact, some of these noble, classical Arabic appellations soon became hyperbolized by the drawl of the Mississippi-accented idiom, while the *lisan al-mala'ikah* (language of

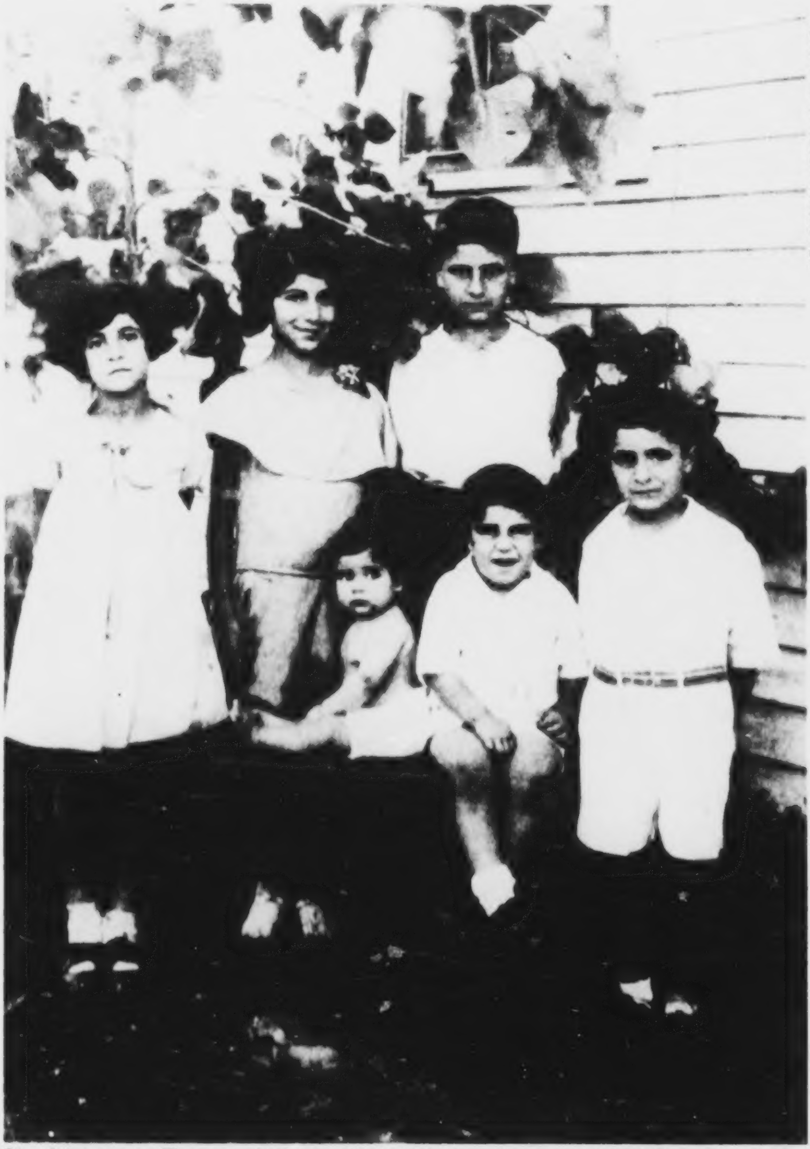


PHOTO MRS M WEBEH COLLECTION

Six of the seven Thomas children at their Vicksburg home ca. 1934. Standing clockwise: George (13), Ernest, Jr. (5), Billy (3), Evelyn (7), Vivian (9). Missing: Bertha (14). The infant seated, center, is Clementine Thomas Wehba, the mother of Missy Wehba, who was an ADC intern in the summer of 1985.

the angels) has fallen into disuse by successive American-born inheritors of the Arab ethnic heritage. Hence, Naseef, the adjective signifying righteousness has become "Nay Sif"; Jabour, derived from the Arabic word for omnipotence, is pronounced "Ja Bow"; and Habeeb, which means beloved, is rendered as "Hay Beeb" in Mississippi.

## *Economic Role*

Like other immigrants to the south in this period, the Syrians were able to make their contribution to a sector of the economy that did not already have a developed infrastructure, where cotton growing and production and some lumber production, provided the economic base of the region.

The south lacked a developed mercantile tradition. Some theorists attribute this phenomenon to the racial segregationist mentality of the indigenous white Anglo-Saxon "aristocracy." Their aversion to contact with the black population in a role other than that of the slavemaster rendered them unwilling and unable to serve the black public over the counter.[22] Clearly, a similar lack of mercantile tradition existed among farming villagers in the mountains of Lebanon. With rare exception, these thrifty, hard-working, immigrants, like the majority of immigrants to this country, came from simple peasant origins. This reality provides little defense for theories that Arab-American immigrants were traditionally or congenitally disposed to peddling.[23] Rather, the nature of opportunities in the turn-of-the-century Mississippi Delta encouraged them to specialize and succeed in peddling, and later in retail and other forms of commerce.

Native white Mississippians had not been attracted to, nor particularly successful in, the retail business. There, as elsewhere in the American south, these Mississippians left a vacuum that was later to be filled by new immigrants. In the system of racial polarization in southern communities there existed no value which sanctioned the occupation of shopkeeper; in fact, there was a stigma attached to it.[24] In this regard, the experience of the Syrian-Americans is shared by those other immigrant groups in Mississippi during the period—particularly the Chinese, East European Jews and Italians.

Arab shopkeepers let their black customers know that their money was as valuable as anyone else's. The established white Mississippians tended to display a take-it-or-leave-it attitude with regard to their African-American clientele; however, black customers preferred Arab shopkeepers' way of bargaining and appearing to make concessions.[25] Developing good business relations with the black population in the Delta served the interest of the immigrant merchants and shopkeepers in the long run. This is not to say that the immigrants identified with their black neighbors. The ethnic minorities of the Delta usually knew the black population either as customers or as domestic servants only. Nevertheless, the common deprecatory terms for blacks in the south were not commonly used in the Syrian community; however, the Arabic term 'abeed (meaning slave) was, and is, frequently used in reference to black Americans.[26]

Those immigrants and their children who started as peddlers in the 1880s already owned their own grocery, clothing or dry goods stores by the turn of the century, and peddling by Syrians ended completely by 1910. Shortly after the turn of the century, Syrian immigrants began to diversify by investing in land. In 1905, brothers Caleel (Khaleel) and John Jabour purchased a piece of real estate in the first instance of land ownership by Syrian immigrants in Vicksburg.

By 1908, six dry goods stores in Vicksburg, out of a total of 36, were Syrian-owned, and five out of 150 grocery stores were likewise owned by Syrian families.[27] Figures for 1911 show an overall increase in commercial establishments in Vicksburg, with nine out of 162 groceries and 10 of the existing 29 dry goods stores owned by Syrian-Americans.[28] The total number of establishments decreased in time, but the proportion of the total grocery and dry goods businesses in Vicksburg owned by Arab-Americans steadily grew. For example, 11 of the 20 existing dry goods stores in Vicksburg in 1921 and 26 of the 50 grocery stores in town were Syrian-owned.[29]

The commercial opportunities found in the *mahjar* offered the Syrians a chance for greater economic independence than was ever possible in the old country. This, of course, has brought about certain social cosequences, as family and community interdependence gradually became a less pressing economic necessity. Some Vicksburgers of Arab descent who have visited their ancestral villages remark that social life there reflects more the kind of closeness that characterized the Syrian community in Vicksburg in earlier days. Older generations recall when one was always prepared to receive guests for vigorous rounds of *shaddeh* (card game) or *tawileh* (backgammon), and Sunday was the day for feasting and bringing extended families together. However, economic self-sufficiency sometimes also meant greater social self-sufficiency.

Among the business success stories of Syrian Vicksburgers are reports of missed opportunities as well. In retrospect, J.M. Nosser regrets passing up the chance to get in on a multi-state Coca-Cola distributorship in the 1920s. When Ellis (Elias) Nasif was a salesman for the St. Louis clothing manufacturer, E.D. Walker, in the 1920s, a Syrian colleague named Maroun Hajjar offered him the chance to join a new business venture. He decided not to join the partnership which would turn out to be enormously successful Haggar menswear manufacturer.

Vicksburg was a growing town in its own right. In 1900, Vicksburg had a population of 14,834 and was the largest city in the state of Mississippi [30] (although it ranked third in industrialization). By 1910, Vicksburg had expanded to over 20,000 inhabitants, and stabilized during the subsequent period of economic decline.[31] Then the 1920s brought a period of demographic and economic growth. Twenty-nine industries were operating in Vicksburg in 1929[32], and Mississippi River cargo shipments increased in volume from 80,000 tons in 1919 to 294,000 tons in 1928.[33]

Industry was growing throughout the country and the call was out to man the factories of the north and east. John Nosser was only in Vicksburg two weeks when a cousin in Cleveland beckoned him to come and find work in that industrial town. So, John borrowed the train fare from his cousins in Vicksburg and traveled north and found work in a car battery factory, but he found conditions unbearable there and quit. Then John took a position in a candy factory, which brought him $24 per week. Within two weeks John had saved enough money to repay his debt to his cousin in Vicksburg.

Thirteen months later, John's cousin, Tom Nosser, asked him to return to work with him in the family grocery store in Vicksburg. Nearly three years later, John's cousin convinced him that the only way he could afford to have a family of his own was to own his own store. With a loan of $3,000, J.M. Nosser opened his own grocery in 1924, where he can still be found working today at the age of 87.

After the stock market crash of 1929, persons who had placed their economic surplus in stocks saw these investments evaporate. Factories closed and most who offered only their labor in trade for income found themselves destitute. The federally-funded Civilian Conservation Corps offered jobs in civil improvement projects for the meagre wage of two dollars per day. Prices were commensurately low and grocers, among them many Syrian-Americans, were selling bacon at 10 cents a pound, eggs at 10 cents a dozen, bread for a nickel or dime per loaf, while coffee and cheese sold for about 20 cents a pound. Supplies were also low. According to one informant, grocery stocks that before the depression may have been worth about $2,000 now were reduced to $800—a 60 percent reduction. Profit margins were modest. One old-time Syrian grocer reports that, in those days, an item bought wholesale for 8 cents and sold for about 12 cents retail would allow the storekeeper to "make a little something."

Vicksburg's inveterate grocer, John Nosser, with his wife Effi Mitchell (Mikha'il) from Bukh'az (al-Qurneh) had four children by 1933 when John realized that, with $1,375 owing to the wholesaler, there was nothing in his store that actually belonged to him. So, he declared bankruptcy and dejectedly surrendered the store to his creditor, Mr. Lester. Foreseeing economic recovery, Mr. Lester encouraged the Nossers to stay in business and instructed his salesman to continue taking orders so that the Nossers could stay in business.

Mr. Lester's prescience was confirmed when the economy regenerated by the mid-1930s. The economy of Vicksburg began to recover, and with the help of the Federal Housing Authority many Vicksburgers built new homes. In 1939, an average lot in Vicksburg could be had for approximately $1,000, and the FHA could finance the $3,000 or so for a modest rambler. The Vicksburg community was steadily getting on its feet again, and the Syrian community was yet to realize its greatest success.

Owner and founder of Abraham Bros. Department Store on Washington St., Haseeb Abraham, is one of the Vicksburg community elders. Until recently, he owned the plant adjacent to his store, where Coca Cola was first bottled.

The Depression was felt severely in the old country, too. Their plight was magnified by the fact that the entire region was under the grip of yet another foreign occupation. During the struggle for national independence in the inter-war period, Beirut was attacked and Damascus bombed by the French, and Palestine suffered brutality never realized under the centuries of Turkish rule.

Ameen Nasif (Fattouh) had been waiting over a decade to return with his family to America and resume their life in the company of family and friends in Vicksburg. Hopes for Syrian independence were dashed in the aftermath of the French bombing of Damascus in 1926, the year Ameen finally gained permission to immigrate. However as fate would have it, Ameen suffered a ruptured appendix and died on his way to the departing ship. Ameen's wife, three sons and a daughter remained in Beirut, separated from the two older sons living in Mississippi—that is until their son, Na'eem, was compelled by extraordinary circumstances to emigrate the following decade.

Resistance against the French occupiers was conducted from Syria by the *Hizb al-Qawmi al-Souri* (Syrian Social Nationalist Party). The SSNP advanced the objective of a secular, independent and united Arab republic that would include present day Syria, Jordan, Palestine (Israel) and Lebanon. The Party, guided by strategist and ideologue Antoun Sa'adeh, fought for the expulsion of the foreign occupiers of Syria and Palestine and advocated sweeping social reforms.

Na'eem Naseef Fattouh, son of the Vicksburg's first Syrian immigrant, led the resistance against the French in the Jubayl region, near his native Munsif. Na'eem's activities in the SSNP were conducted underground, and even his immediate family was unaware of his involvement.

Na'eem worked regularly in the family's restaurant on Beirut's *Sahat al-Burj* (Martyr's Square), and in one night in 1939 his life was changed. All of a sudden there appeared at the bar an operative of the French mandatory administration, demanding Na'eem Fattouh. The inspector didn't know Na'eem, but Na'eem knew him. The dapper 26-year-old informed the French official that Mr. Fattouh would be back in just a few minutes. Appearing to go about his business, Na'eem slipped out the back door in flight. He had had enough experience with the French occupation to know what his fate might be at the hands of the French occupation forces.

His first stop was his mother's home, where she advised him to escape to America to join his brothers in Mississippi. That he did. Na'eem Naseef Fattouh escaped French colonial tyranny—through the eye of the storm as it were—on a midnight ship to France. Following the path of many an immigrant before him, from Marseilles to Paris, from Paris to La Havre, Na'eem arrived at Ellis Island. The Vicksburg-Port Gibson Nasifs were alerted by telegram to Na'eem's unexpected emigration, and they made their way to meet him at Ellis Island and to bring him to his new Vicksburg home.

Na'eem Nasif (Fattouh), who was a restaurateur by profession in Beirut, was introduced to the package liquor business through local businessmen and his brother Ellis. Na'eem (known as Norman in Mississippi) and a "Captain" Tom Marsey operated Vicksburg's two wholesaler outlets during the 1940s and 1950s.

Mississippi River cities of the late 1930s and 1940s were relatively more liberal than the interior communities. The state of Mississippi remained under prohibition, officially, until 1966. However, as in other riverfront counties in the state, Vicksburg maintained outlets for packaged liquor which drew in visitors from throughout the region, (including perfectly proper southern ladies who drove to Vicksburg to stock up for their afternoon tea parties).

In the 1940s, some 40 retail liquor outlets operated in Vicksburg under special dispensation by the local sherrif, who accepted a "commission" in return—usually 10 percent of the revenues—known as the black market tax. The practice, which began as an open secret in that dry state, evolved into a Mississippi institution.

In the 1940s, economic boom resulting from the American war effort accelerated the flow of capital in and through Vicksburg. The town in this period featured popular night spots such as The Showboat, anchored on an island on the Louisiana side of the river near Vicksburg, and the Rainbow, which was owned and operated by Ellis Nasif. In those days Vicksburg clubs hosted such contemporary artists as Skitch Henderson and Fats Waller. Vicksburg has perhaps never been so lively as it was then, but Mississippi's transition from its previous "dry" status in 1966 meant the end of an era for the state's river counties, and an abrupt loss of business to prohibition purveyors.[34]

The American military involvement in World War II absorbed many of Vicksburg's first and second generation Syrian-Americans. Shoophie (Shafeeq) Habeeb was stationed with U.S. forces in Cairo, and during his 3-year stint was able to take leave to visit his native village of Bishmizzeen. One Arab-American patriot, George Habeeb, was awarded the Purple Heart for injury in the field of battle, and a number of the Vicksburg men who served also paid the ultimate price as America's fighting men. Syrian-American sons George Farris, Spiro Abraham and Bill Sam fell in World War II.

The 1940s were a watershed for the Syrian-Americans in Vicksburg; they had by then achieved a high level of success in their business enterprises. The generations born in this decade have shown a high rate of diversification, specializing in professions such as law, medicine and government. Besides professional diversification, this period is also characterized by an unprecedented rate of exogamy. Of the generation born after 1940 there exists only one case of a marriage within the Vicksburg Syrian community. This period also saw the discontinuation of the Arabic language[35] in the community at a time when it also underwent important developments regarding self-identity, in response to their understanding of events in the old country.

A state roughly corresponding to the district of Mount Lebanon was carved from greater Syrian and granted independence in 1943 as the Republic of Lebanon. Beginning with this development the Arab-Americans of Mississippi began to refer to themselves as Lebanese. With very few exceptions, the Arab-American families in Mississippi, in fact, emigrated from what is now Lebanon and publicly favor this parochial identity to affiliation with the more general identity as Syrian or Arab. Though the Arab immigrants to Mississippi had been known for decades as Syrians, this relatively new dissociation has a residual effect of absolving the "Lebanese" from identification with general Arab issues. A handful of individuals in the Mississippi Lebanese community privately express disappointment over the truncation of Syria and the destruction of Palestine, but most find these concerns far removed from day-to-day life in the Delta.

## Discrimination and Acceptance

Acceptance is a collective concern of new immigrants and their children, in general, and the Syro-Lebanese-Americans, in particular. Vicksburgers testify to discriminatory treatment by some elements of the local white establishment on the basis of their ethnic identity. In the largely-conservative south, the effort to conform becomes part of everyday consciousness; however, some forms of specific exclusion of the Lebanese-Americans from Vicksburg establishment were institutionalized.

When the charter of Vicksburg's new country club was formalized in 1930, the Syrians were excluded from membership. It wasn't until 1960 that this stipulation was dropped, when a new generation of these same families themselves became integrated into the local establishment.

In 1930, however, Arab-American interests were elsewhere. At that early stage of the community's development, most Syrians in Vicksburg were too preoccupied working double shifts in their shops and maintaining the cohesiveness of their own community to consider contributing money to an exclusive organization based on the English cult of golf. After nearly half a century in Vicksburg, the Arab-American community remained socially and economically conservative and was not yet assimilated into the host environment; but, as one Vicksburg resident observed, "Ya know, that's why people are clannish . . . Other people force 'em inta it."

In spite of their cohesion, this ethnic community has inevitably adopted much more of the host culture than it has retained of its Arab traditions. However, some of that which remains spills over from time to time into the surrounding society at large. The Levantine culinary art is one example of cultural exchange which has consequently been introduced to local Vicksburg culture, most notably through the annual Lebanese dinner offered every year in March by the St. George congregation. This public event is usually previewed by a special edition of the *Vicksburg Post's* food section, featuring recipes of popular Lebanese dishes. In the 27th year of the fund-raising banquet in 1984, 2,900 Vicksburgers partook of the *kibbeh, waraq dawali, ma'moul* and other delights prepared by the Lebanese ladies of Vicksburg.

The dabkeh is *de rigeur* at any Lebanese function in Vicksburg. The traditional cuisine and dance are cultural standards with which all members of the Arab community in Vicksburg can identify. One Vicksburg woman, Mary-Louise Nosser, has promoted this aspect of her Lebanese heritage as an instructor of Middle Eastern dance at schools and colleges in Vicksburg and Port Gibson. This continued for six years until, as Mary-Louise reports, "the world (and Vicksburg) went aerobic."

In the 1970s, Maha Habeeb, a native of Lebanon, conducted Arabic language classes through the church. However, owing to waning discipline and interest in learning what is now a difficult foreign language, student enrollment fell and the program was discontinued. Sentiments in Vicksburg are mixed as to the importance of preserving the Arab linguistic heritage.

Growing up Arab in Mississippi society often meant rejecting one's ancestral language as a stigmatic reminder of separateness. A Lebanese-American who grew up in Vicksburg in the 1950s recalls her feeling of self-consciousness at the time should her young friends know that she spoke Arabic at home:

"We were too busy trying to get our friends to like us for five minutes that we didn't wanna be speakin' a foreign language; and we didn't want our parents speakin' it ta us. We were tryin' so hard ta be accepted. And that's why we didn't learn—not that we were ashamed, mind you, but we were just fightin' a different battle. Y'all know how kids are."[36]

Other immigrant minorities in the Delta suffered their own forms of discrimination. The Chinese, who had first arrived in Mississippi in 1872,[37] were defeated in their fight for acceptance into white public schools when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of their segregation in 1927.[38] When a petition was circulated to allow a Chinese child into the Clarksdale, Mississippi, public school, Lebanese businessmen in that town joined the petitioners in favor.[39]

Many non-northern European immigrants together found themselves socially and legally relegated to the status of second class citizens in the south. Cases have been reported in which Italians in Shaw and Shelby, Mississippi were barred from dating the white "aristocracy,"[40] and Vicksburgers who now have grown children of their own can remember times when their own schoolmates reported they were "not allowed to go around with Syrians anymore."[41]

The society at large is sometimes the most active reminder to the Lebanese of their special identity. First generation Arab-Americans growing up in the Delta report common harassment and name-calling by locals, when earlier in this century "dago" was the usual insult for Italian and Arab-Americans alike.

The 1960s and the context of southern race relations in the south colored the experience of many Americans of Arab heritage in Mississippi. As a student in Jackson in 1964, a Lebanese-American woman from Vicksburg recalls being forcibly ejected from a laundromat by its owner, because blacks were not allowed there. She tells that when she faced such discrimination, at first she would argue, "I'm not black, I'm Lebanese!" But she began to make the argument against such racism on its own merits. This same woman went on to become a lawyer, and she cites her first-hand experiences with discrimination as a catalyst for her specialization in civil rights law.

Lebanese generally shared the objectives of the civil rights movement to redress the racism directed toward the black people of the south. The Lebanese themselves were sensitized to the problem through their own experiences with southern society. The Vicksburg Lebanese, too, have had to struggle for acceptance. In looking back on their history in Mississippi, a number of members of this community have echoed the words of one Lebanese banker in Mississippi who was quoted to say in 1971, "We have fine relations with the other minority groups [Chinese, blacks, European Jews]. The problem has been with the majority."[42]

Lebanese Vicksburgers refer to their acceptance and higher education in the same context. The community can now boast that many second and third generation Arab-Americans are well represented in the medical, legal and academic fields. The Delta's Lebanese have also specialized in such diverse professions as engineers, chiropractors, dentists and authors.

In the 1940s, the second generation descending from Vicksburg's earliest Syrian immigrants was already reaching adulthood, and it is then one begins to find diversity of occupations among the members of the Lebanese-American community. One result of this is seen by a drop in the proportion of Syrian-owned retail outlets, whereas Lebanese-owned dry goods and groceries constituted over 50 percent of the total in 1921, only 24 out of 135 grocers were Lebanese owned in 1948/9, as were only 4 of 12 dry goods stores.[43]

After only 11 years in this country, Albert Habeeb (son of Alex) had graduated from high school first in his class during the Depression in 1933. Albert later became the first Syrian-born immigrant in the south to attend medical school, and is now senior anesthesiologist in the state of Alabama. Not long after Albert Habeeb entered medical school, three members of the Jabour family followed his example, and doctors and dentists are also found in the Abraham family.

The John Ellis (Shawan) family has largely come to specialize in the legal profession in the second American-born generation. Four of five children became distinguished attorneys, and one is a successful engineer. John Ellis, Jr. currently serves as Warren County Circuit Court Judge in Vicksburg and is an example of the contribution of the Lebanese of Mississippi in government and elected office.

Judge Ellis recognizes the clanishness that exists in some ethnic communities as providing a positive political lesson. John Ellis, Sr. had joined St. Paul's Catholic Church when his family was very young. By growing up in the Catholic Church the Ellises had many friends in the Italian-American community in Vicksburg, as well as maintaining close family links with the other Lebanese-Americans in town. When the time came for Mississippi Governor J.B. Williams to appoint a new District Attorney, young John Ellis was introduced to the Governor through a mutual friend in Vicksburg, George Tannous. When one thousand local signatures were needed in Vicksburg to petition for his appointment, John Ellis drew a swell of support from those who knew him, both in the Lebanese community, as well as from among his Italian-American coreligionists.

Arab-American involvement in Mississippi government was pioneered by the legendary politico, Colonel Joe Abraham. Joseph Abraham, married to Maggie Ellis (Shawan) of Vicksburg, rose to political prominence in the 1920s when he was appointed Colonel (gubernatorial advisor) by the famous Mississippi machine politician Governor Theodore Bilbo. The political influence of Col. Abraham may be partially responsible for the passage of a stipulation in Mississippi property law, which states: "Nonresident aliens who are citizens of Syria or the Lebanese Republic may inherit property from citizens or residents of the State of Mississippi."[44]

Other Lebanese-Americans who have served in elected office in Mississippi include two state Senators: Ellis Bodron of Vicksburg and Ollie Mohamed of Belzoni. Senator Mohamed, son of Delta immigrant Hassen Mohamed (Shoman) of Sir'een, Lebanon, has served in the Mississippi legislature since 1965. Senator Ellis Bodron served his constituency for 36 years as state senator. Twenty of those years were spent as Chairman of the Finance Committee. He is a talented public speaker who has gained the admiration of his colleagues and constituents for his formidable achievements despite the handicap of blindness.

The Arab-Americans of the Mississippi Delta have produced many achievers who have gained the acceptance and recognition of their communities. Arab descendants in the Delta have served as mayors in Clarksdale and Natchez. The Mississippi Delta is also served by the charitable work of the Memphis-based Badour Foundation, which operates a home for mentally retarded adults in Senatobia, Mississippi.

As President of Citifirst Bank in Vicksburg, Shoophie (Shafeeq) Habeeb has had a long and varied experience in that community. When he reflects on the evolution of the Lebanese-Americans in Vicksburg, Shoophie recalls that, after returning from three years of military service during World War II, he was refused membership in the local Kiwanis Club because of his ethnic origin. Mr. Habeeb argued his case and finally gained membership. Five years after denying him admission, the Vicksburg Kiwanis Club elected Shoophie Habeeb their president. Since then, he has served as president of the local Rotary Club and YMCA, and, along with other members of the Lebanese community in 1960, joined the same Vicksburg Country Club that excluded Lebanese membership 30 years before.

The Orthodox community is also represented in Vicksburg through the Very Reverend Nicholas Saikley. His civic contributions include serving on the board of the Warren County Historical Society, and he is the longest-standing member of Vicksburg's Ministerial

Association.

The Lebanese-Americans in the Delta have experienced general professional success, but not without struggle and hardship as well. Many members of the community have achieved prominence, but not without confronting the obstacles of discrimination. And many examples indicate that their integration into this southern society has been a process of acceptance through service. ◆

## Notes

1. Frances Terry Ingmire and Carolyn Reeves Ericson. *First Settlers of the Mississippi Territory*. Jackson: 1982.

2. Most of the faithful of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Arab world are descended from the ancient Arab people of the Ghassanid tribe in Syria, who were Christianized in the 4th century.

3. The triple settlements of the Sidonians, Tyrians and Aradians converged to form Tripoli in 359 B.C., the first year of the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus (359-338 B.C.).

4. Noel Verney and George Dambmann. *Les puissance etrangere dans le Levant, en Syria, et en Palestine*. Paris and Lyons, 1900, p. 367, cited in John Gulick. Tripoli: *A Modern Arab City*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 38.

5. The 1943 population of Bishmizzeen of 1,000 was largely Orthodox, but included 150 Muslims and three Maronite households. Afif Tannous. "Missionary Education in Lebanon: A Study in Acculturation." *Social Forces*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1943) p. 338.

6. Afif Tannous. "Acculturation of an Arab-Syrian Community in the Deep South." *Americans Sociological Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1943) p. 265.

7. John Gulick. *Social Structure and Cultural Change in a Lebanese Village*. New York, London: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1971, p. 26.

8. Said B. Himadeh. *Economic Organization of Syria*. Beirut: American Press, 1936, pp. 410 - 411.

9. Gulick. op cit., p. 63

10. Ibid, p. 64.

11. Ibid, p. 63.

12. See Sufiuddin Joarder. *Syria under French Mandate, 1920-1927*. Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1977; Stephen H. Longrigg. *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1958; Dominique Chevalier. "Lyons et la Syria en 1919: les bases d'une intervention." *Revue Historique* (Oct.-Dec. 1960); *Revue des Deux Mondes*. "L'Ouvres de la France en Syrie." (March 21, 1921); Ministe're des Affaires Etrangeres. *Rapport sur la Situation de la Syrie et du Liban*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1923.

13. Population density of Lebanon at the turn of the century is estimated at 93 per square mile. S.B. Himadeh. op cit., p. 14.

14. Ibid, p. 16.

15. A. Tannous. "Acculturation," op cit., p. 270.

16. Old Law Naturalization Project. *Index to Naturalization Records: Mississippi Courts, 1798-1906.* Jackson: Service Division, Work Projects Administration, 1942.

17. Thirteenth Census of the United States (Records for Warren Co., Mississippi). National Archives, Washington, D.C. File 19, drawer 831.

18. Interview conducted June 8, 1985.

19. Gulick (1955), op cit., p. 63 .

20. Quote from William H. McDonald. "A Long Way from Bishmizzin." *Journal of the Medical Association of the State of Alabama*, Vol. 52, No. 9 (March 1983) p. 9.

21. See *The New York Times*, April 25, 1927 and July 10, 1927.

22. See James W. Loewen. *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971. Here, Loewen draws a parallel with the role of immigrants in the Caribbean as discussed by M.G. Smith, *The Plural Society in the British West Indies.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965; also Leonard Broom. "The Social Differentiation of Jamaica." *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19 (1954) See also John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town.* New York: Harper and Row, 1949.

23. See, among others, Habib I. Katibah. *Arabic Speaking Americans.* New York: Institute of Arab-Americans Affairs, Inc, 1946.

24. See J.W. Loewen. op cit.

25. See Dollard. op cit. and the author's discussion of the black population in the south and their relations with Jewish and other immigrant merchants.

26. Tannous (1943) goes so far as to attribute discriminatory tendencies to the Syrian immigrants in his study, which he claims are adopted from the host culture (p. 269). This claim, however, overlooks the phenomenon of racism in the Arab world. This observation of four decades ago may today be an overstatement of contemporary problem.

27. *Vicksburg City Directory, 1908.* Memphis: R.L. Polk Co., 1908

28. *Vicksburg City Directory, 1911.* Memphis: R.L. Polk Co., 1911.

29. *Vicksburg City Directory, 1921.* Memphis: R.L. Polk Co., 1921.

30. Office of the Census. *1910 Census*, Vol. 2. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911.

31. Preston E. James. "Vicksburg: a study in urban geography." *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 21 (April 1931) p. 234.

32. Ibid., p. 239.

33. Some of this increase came about at the expense of railroad shipments. Ibid, p. 242.

34. See *The New York Times*, February 6, 1966.

35. Tannous predicted in the year of his study (1943) that the then 50/50 use of Arabic would eventually disappear. Tannous, 1943. Op cit., p. 266.

36. Interview conducted June 8, 1985.

37. Chan Kit Mui L. "The Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta." *Journal of Mississippi History*, Vol 35, No. 1. pp. 29-36.

38. See *The New York Times*, October 11, 1927 and November 22, 1927.

39. Loewen, op cit., p. 114.

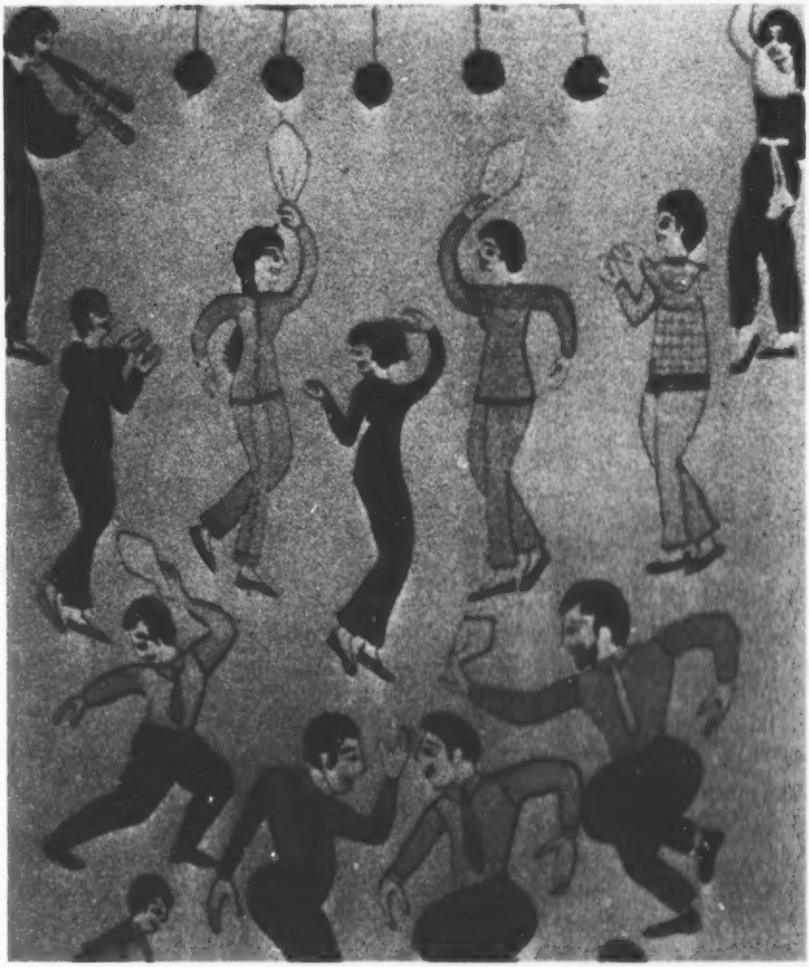
40. Ibid, pp. 113-115.

41. Interview conducted June 8, 1985.

42. Loewen, op cit., p. 114.

43. *Vicksburg City Directory*, 1948-49. Richmond, Va.: R.L. Polk Co., 1949.

44. *Mississippi State Law Real and Personal Property, Land and Conveyances*, Sec. 89-1-23.



Ethel Mohamed's needlework depicts scenes from her family life in Belzoni. Here, Hassen and his cousins lead their children in the dabkeh on New Year's Eve.

# The Mohameds in Mississippi

### By Joseph Schechla

Ethel Wright was just a young girl of 16 when she took on a summer job at Mr. Slatter's bakery in Shaw, Mississippi. It took some cajoling on her part to get her daddy to agree to let her work. "Papa was very strict on me, you know," Ethel explains. "Well, I just thought it would be the grandest thing in the world to have a job like that, so I begged Papa one day all afternoon long to let me work there."

Papa finally gave in and let Ethel take the job, but not without clear conditions: she was to come straight home from work and was not to pay any attention to the boys who came in the bakery. Ethel agreed. However, no sooner had she started her job at Slatter's bakery than she noticed a certain young gentleman who came regularly to the shop.

Mr. Slatter had instructed Ethel that the six specially-baked loaves prepared daily were for the Jewish families in town. Together with these was one loaf for another man, who Mr. Slatter explained is not Jewish, but he takes from the same bread. This man's name was Mr. Mohamed. Hassen Mohamed came in every day around lunch time to pick up his bread, and Ethel couldn't help noticing that this man had the most beautiful brown eyes. "Why, I thought he was the most wonderful thing in the world, and the most beautiful thing I ever laid eyes on," she recalls. The year was 1923.

Ethel was a bit shy and remembered her father's advice. She didn't dare to speak to Hassen. "Oh, I was just a silly girl then. You know how girls are at 16." But one day Hassen picked out some cookies to eat while he waited for his order. Ethel had already caught Hassen's eye, and he kept her in sight as he ate his cookies and waited. Finally Ethel found the nerve to speak. "It seems you sure do like those cookies," she remarked. Hassen replied, "It's you I like. And you're going to be my wife." Ethel confides that she was thrilled, "You know how girls are at 16."

Soon after their first encounter, Hassen came to call on Ethel at her parents' house. During his first visits to the Wright's home, Hassen chatted a bit with Ethel and then got up to go talk with Papa Wright. This behavior continued to Ethel's puzzlement. "So all the time Hassen was coming to see me, he spent most of the time with Papa," Ethel complains. But as Hassen and Papa Wright got well acquainted, Papa speculated to his daughter, "That must be how they do things in the old country." Papa Wright was impressed with the well-mannered Hassen, and there developed a mutual respect between them. A year later, Hassen and Ethel were married.

Hassen Mohamed Ahsen Shoman was born in 1891 in the largely Shi'ite Muslim village of Sir'een, in the Beqa' region east of Beirut. 'Ali Shoman, Hassen's elder brother, was the first in the family to emigrate. 'Ali preceded Hassen to Clarksdale, Mississippi, shortly after the turn of the century and joined the wave of immigrants who worked as peddlers in the agricultural southern United States. However, 'Ali returned to Sir'een according to plan, married and resumed his life there. This was Hassen's intention as well. That is until he met Ethel.

Hassen sailed from Beirut in 1911 to come to the land of opportunity he had heard so much about from his brother. This 19-year-old Arab man did not speak English at the time and did not have a clear idea of what he would do when he arrived in America, but Hassen was not alone. He was joined on his voyage by a friend, a Catholic boy from his home in the Mount Lebanon region of Syria. They arrived together in Marseilles, where they were to board another ship of the White Star Line bound for Ellis Island. Tragedy struck when Hassen's companion was hit and killed by a passing streetcar. Hassen was then saddled with the grim task of sending his friend's body back to his family in Lebanon. The young man from Sir'een was brokenhearted and deeply discouraged by the tragic beginning of his odyssey. However, Hassen felt there was no turning back, and he proceeded to New York. One of the passengers on ship from Marseilles to New York was a Syrian girl traveling alone. Hassen remembered her well. The girl suffered from seasickness during the voyage, and Hassen looked after her, holding her most of the way. Eventually, the girl joined her family in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and she and Hassen remained friends over the years.

At Ellis Island, the full name, Hassen Mohamed Ahsen al-Shoman al-Sir'eeni, became abbreviated to Hassen Mohamed. While in New York, members of Brooklyn's Syrian community showed Hassen around and introduced him to some of the available opportunities for work there. However, Hassen was not encouraged. He visited factories of all kinds and saw the abysmal working conditions there. He also saw some workers who had lost hands and feet in the factory machinery. This only strengthened his resolve to head south "where the cotton is." Hassen had heard there was money to be made down there.

Hassen's career began when he arrived in Clarksdale and met a man who sponsored him as a peddler. Hassen started out with a suitcase filled with $27.50 worth of merchandise which he carried on foot throughout the countryside. Hassen's patron encouraged him, saying that although he understood neither the language nor the money, the people would help him make the right change. Being an honest man, Hassen trusted that others were likewise. "Hassen said he didn't believe anybody in the Delta ever beat him out of anything," Ethel remembers.

Hassen was a good and successful salesman who loved his work. Soon he became established in the area with regular customers. Hassen was frugal and saved much of his income, and by 1914 he invested in a horse and buggy with which he could carry more merchandise to the countryside. The young immigrant was able to send some money home to Sir'een for his mother to purchase land near the village. Perhaps this was the land to which Hassen originally intended to return and establish his home and family.

By 1918, Hassen was joined by his cousin Dave (Da'oud) Hamod (Shoman), and in 1922 they launched their partnership as proprietors of a dry goods business in Shaw, Mississippi. Soon afterwards, Hassen met Ethel Wright and, thereafter, the name Mohamed was assured a permanent place in the Mississippi Delta.

Another cousin, Charlie Abraham, was already operating his own store some 40 miles away in Belzoni (pronounced Belzona). Charlie encouraged Hassen and Dave to move to his town where business was more promising. Shortly after Hassen and Ethel were married, H. Mohamed and D. Hamod opened their store together on Central Street in Belzoni. The three (Shoman) cousins of Sir'een were soon joined by a fourth, Sam Schuman, who also opened a dry goods store in Belzoni. The cousins all remained very close, and no one of them made a major decision of any kind with seeking *mushawareh* (counsel) of the other three.

Hassen and Ethel made their home in this Mississippi Delta town, where they raised eight little Mohameds. Each of the Mohamed children now have families of their own, and only one is currently living outside the Delta.

Hassen was a devout follower of his Muslim faith. Eventually, however, in this predominantly Baptist culture, Hassen faced a dilemma when it came time to educate the Mohamed children about

God. Hassen conceded that raising his children as Muslims in Belzoni could impose extraordinary complications for them. Consequently, the eight young Mohameds were raised in the Baptist church. Nevertheless, Hassen and Ethel were not remiss in informing their children of their dual heritage.

All of Ethel and Hassen's sons and daughters bear Arabic as well as American names. Their first born was a boy who was given the name Ollie ('Ali), in honor of Hassen's elder brother. The next seven children were given double names: Bubba, who was also named Ahsen after Hassens' father; Sahiyeh, whom her mother named Hazel; Najweh (Jane), Suhayleh (Sunshine) and Fadiyeh (June). Ethel insisted upon naming their third son after his father, but now most folks know him by his American name, Buddy. The youngest child, Carol, was also given the name 'Aliyeh, which is the feminine form of the name 'Ali.

Hassen is remembered as a consummate storyteller. He often gathered his children around him to relate to them the biography of Mohammed the Prophet. Hassen and Ethel's children identified to some degree with Islam through their father, as well as by bearing the name of Islam's last prophet.

Formally, however, the Mohamed children grew up as Baptists, like the overwhelming majority of Belzoni's 3,000 inhabitants. Ethel took her children to the Baptist church located just across the street from their home on Hayden Street. One day, the resident minister there was given to denouncing those of other faiths. His defamatory remarks from the pulpit about "Mohammedans" treated the faithful of Islam "as if they worshipped a different God or something," says Ethel, who had developed a respect for Islam through knowing the Shomans and their ways. She felt that the mentality displayed by the Baptist minister was "just plain ignorance." She never went back to that church.

Hassen paid little attention to such self-righteous displays as that of the bigoted Baptist minister. When Ethel encouraged Hassen to attend church with her and the children, he would usually reply passively, "Oh, all right." But, of course, he rarely stayed awake during the service. As a younger man, though, Hassen occasionally encountered hostility in Mississippi, and when someone dared to call him "dago," he admitted he would "let 'em have it."

Though he came from a conservative village background, Hassen's own views were often more tolerant than those prevailing in Mississippi during his lifetime. In Mount Lebanon, numerous religious groups lived together in peace for centuries without the interference of foreign powers, and it was in this spirit that he approached issues of religious diversity. When his daughter fell in love with a Catholic boy, the social environment suggested to her that her father would disapprove of him because of his religion. Mrs. Mohamed knew her husband well and assured her daughter than Hassen would not mind. Hassen only shared his daughter's happiness.

There were several Syro-Lebanese communities in the Delta: Greenwood, Greenville, Clarksdale, Yazoo City, Vicksburg and Port Gibson, not to mention those in Jackson and Meridian as well. These were exclusively Christian communities which were largely self-contained. These communities of common Arab heritage knew each other, but did not always develop strong inter-community solidarity. Regarding regular contacts with other Arabs in the Delta, the Mohameds recall only one dry goods wholesaler of Syrian origin who occasionally came around to Belzoni. The Syrian immigrants to Belzoni are unique, not only in terms of their religion, but the four Shoman cousins departed from the norm of delayed assimilation. All four—Hassen, Dave, Charlie and Sam—married directly into the host society. Their marriages to American women accelerated their assimilation more rapidly than those immigrants who found their new homes within a cohesive Arab ethnic community.

As individuals, the Muslims of Belzoni kept their faith alive, and Ethel recalls that Hassen prayed regularly. Before he left the house every morning Hassen would say a little prayer which began "Bismillah al-Rahman al-Raheem . . ." Neither his American family nor his neighbors held a deep understanding of the religion Hassen and his cousins brought to Mississippi; however, their faith could be appreciated through their example. These were truly family men. They did not drink and were known for their fairness in both their social and commercial dealings. Ethel recalls, for instance, that Hassen often extended credit to customers in need, and would never demand payment from a widow.

Hassen and Dave Hamod had always intended to divide their store at some point. In 1944, the business was doing well and both cousins felt they could stand on their own, so the Mohamed-Hamod enterprise became two separate dry goods stores which stood side-by-side on Central Street. Hassen and Dave painstakingly divided the merchandise between them, so as to part on the most equal terms possible before the partition was raised between them.

Ethel found it a bit saddening to experience the end of an era, but the men assured Ethel that, if she really wanted Hassen and Dave to remain together, they would tear down the partition at her request. Of course, Ethel did not interfere with their long-standing plan to go independent. This new situation placed the two in close competition in the small market of Belzoni, but all the cousins still cooperated closely and depended heavily upon each other's counsel in all matters.

One day as Ethel was working in the store, she noticed a regular customer of H. Mohamed's General Merchandise going into D. Hamod's Dry Goods and coming out with a new dress. Ethel reported to Hassen that the lady had apparently taken to shopping at Dave's. Hassen advised her to pay no mind to that, saying, "It's only right. My cousin has to make a living too." Ethel never forgot such gestures of that same goodwill that she saw in Hassen on that first day in Mr. Slatter's bakery.

The fraternity enjoyed among the four Syrian cousins was habitually reconfirmed on Sunday afternoons, when they and their families gathered for an Arab feast. All the men—Hassen, Dave, Sam and Charlie—cooked traditional dishes, but Charlie Abraham is reputed to be the local repository of Levantine culinary culture. His home often served as the weekly meeting place for the Shoman cousins and their brood. After dinner all the cousins would join in a lively dabkeh, just like in the old country.

This folk dance has become standard at all family celebrations. The Mohameds can be found dancing the dabkeh at Christmas and even at Fourth of July get-togethers. Although he is no longer among them, Hassen's children and grandchildren join in the traditional dance in commemoration of a common heritage given to them by a father and grandfather who is much loved.

Ethel managed to learn of bit of the Arab cuisine and cultural traditions, but she regrets never really learning more of the Arabic language than the few kitchen terms she associates with those family reunions. She did manage, however, to expand her vocabulary a bit when she went with Hassen on his one trip back to his ancestral home after he emigrated in 1911. In the mid-1950s Ethel and Hassen flew together to what became the Republic of Lebanon. There the couple basked in the welcome of the Shoman family and friends in Sir'een village. "People talk about southern hospitality," remarks Ethel, "but I never saw anything like this. It was something like the return of the prodigal son, you know, in the Bible." Rows of people converged on the Shoman home in Sir'een to greet the returning Hassen and his American bride of nearly 30 years. Many well-wishers ullulated and shot off guns into the air. There was feasting and singing nearly every night, and of course everyone danced the dabkeh. By then, much of the customs and the closeness of family were already familiar to Ethel.

It was particularly difficult for Ethel when Hassan passed away in

1965. They were married 42 years and had raised eight children. She missed him terribly, but she retained precious memories. Ethel resolved to keep those memories alive. She thought, "If I could write, I would write every little memory." Failing that, she took up painting. She starting painting family members in simple figures until she was confronted with the candid criticism of her grandson. "Please Big Mama," he said, "if you ever do a family portrait, will you leave me out?" At that point, Ethel settled on embroidery as the medium for her creative memoires. Since then her stitching has gained her prominence as one of the Mississippi Delta's most celebrated folk artists. Ethel Wright Mohamed's work has been exhibited by the Smithsonian Institution on four different occasions. Mrs. Mohamed was commissioned to depict the Smithsonian's annual American Folklife Festival in a piece of needlework that became the subject of the Festival's official poster in 1976.

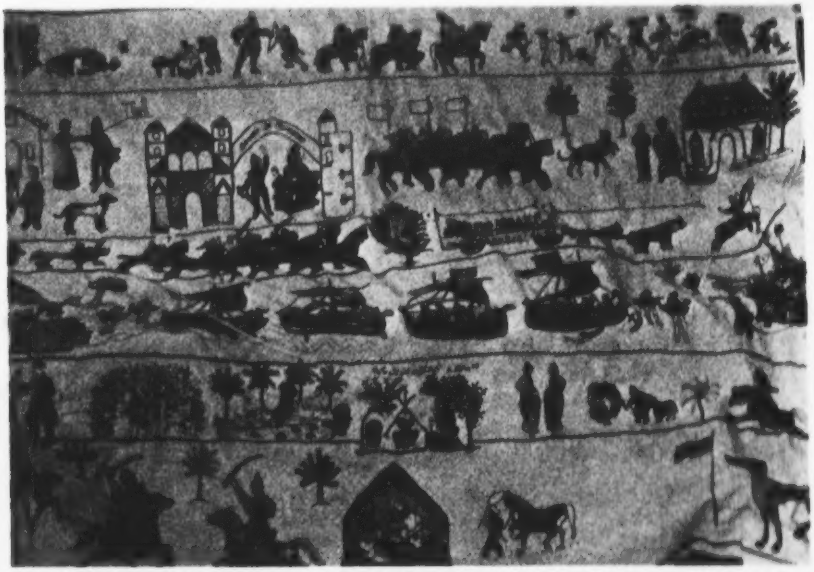
Ethel Wright Mohamed's work is not for sale. The scenes she creates are largely a reconstitution of family life with Hassen Mohamed and their children. Her handiwork is treasured by her children, grandchildren (of which there are 19), as well as her eight great-grandchildren. Among these works of folk art is a series of scenes from Hassen's life: emigration, peddling, establishing his store and raising a family in Mississippi. Many of the scenes composed by Ethel Mohamed are inspired by the stories Hassen so enjoyed telling to his children, not least the tales of *Elf Layleh wa Layleh* (A Thousand and One Nights). Currently, Mrs. Mohamed is working on her magnum opus, "The Third Crusade." In this ambitious project, Hassen's elaborate and gripping tales of Salah al-Din and Richard the Lionhearted are illustrated. Hassen was rightfully proud of Salah al-Din, the defender of Palestine.

Some of the stories Hassen told his children bear a clear moral. One portrayed in Ethel's embroidery relates an allegory, which is commonly told by Arab fathers to their children. It is the story of a dying man who, in this case, had eight children. He asked his eldest son to gather a bundle of sticks. The father told the son to take one stick and break it. This the son did with ease. Then the father instructed his son to take eight sticks together and try to break them, and the boy could not break them. By this demonstration, the dying man instructed his children that any one of them alone can be broken easily; however, if all the children remain united, they will not be broken.

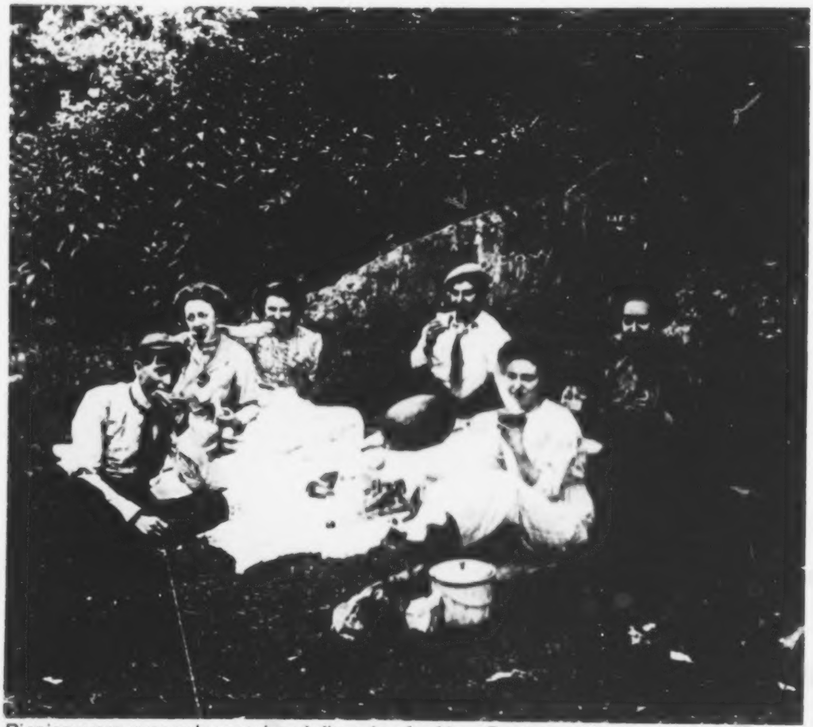
The Mohameds have remained close. The Mohamed sons have established their own businesses. The Mohamed name now appears on several storefronts in downtown Belzoni. These include the original

H. Mohamed's General Merchandise, Mohamed's Home & Auto Store, Mohamed's Mufflers and Ollie Mohamed's Department Store. The Mohammed name has become known throughout Mississippi in another connection. Hassen and Ethel's first born, Ollie, has represented his district as a State Senator in the Mississippi Legislature in Jackson for some 20 years.

Ollie, Bubba and Buddy Mohamed later traveled to Lebanon to visit their distant kin and see their ancestral homeland. On their visit, family members showed the Mohamed boys the property which belonged to them. This was the land that Hassen purchased as a young man through remittances to his mother. Hassen was single then, peddling his wares through the Mississippi Delta. With the many fond memories they retain of their father, many of which are immortalized in their mother's art, Hassen Mohamed Ahsen Shoman's descendants will always know they have a special place of their own in Lebanon. ◆



Ethel's most ambitious work is a piece of embroidery entitled "The Third Crusade," which incorporates many stories Hassen recounted to their children.



Picnics were a popular weekend diversion for New Castle residents, as shown in this 1910 photo.

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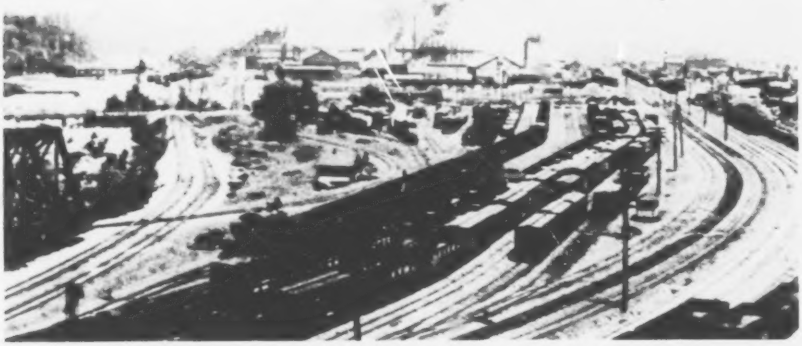
# Syrians in Tin City

### By Anthony B. Toth

The new year which rang in the new century on January 1, 1900, brought with it good news for the residents of New Castle, Pa. The already burgeoning tin industry in the city would be boosted with the opening of the New Castle Tin Mill, "thus starting the new year in a manner mighty satisfactory for all of the employees and the people of New Castle generally," the *New Castle News* reported.

The tin mills dominated New Castle's industrial scene during the 1890s. The city's rapid growth in population was fueled by the demand for industrial workers created by the mills. Railroads, cement, pottery, and iron factories, and other manufacturing also drew laborers. From 1890 to 1900, the city's population jumped more than 150 percent—from 11,600 to 28,757. A large portion of these new residents were immigrants and their families. The largest immigrant contingent to New Castle was Italian. There were also large numbers of Poles, Slovaks, Welsh, Germans, Hungarians, and Scandinavians. Arabic-speaking immigrants found their way to New Castle in this period, and although their numbers were relatively small, they were visable and active in the community. Because they came from what was known as greater Syria (modern day Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine), they were all referred to as "Syrians." They settled in those cities and towns where there was economic opportunity. In Pennsylvania, this meant immigration to concentrations of mines, factories, and railroads. New Castle's Arabic-speaking immigrants were part of the 11,140 "Syrian immigrants" who came to Pennsylvania between 1899 and 1914.[1]

The first Syrians to arrive in New Castle did not take a direct route. After finishing a month-long ocean voyage and arriving in a U.S. port (usually New York or Boston), they worked in the states' other industrial towns and cities: Aliquippa, New Kensington, Smithton, Wilkes-Barre, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. Word-of-mouth, letters, and newspaper ads kept the pool of immigrant labor flowing to the areas of high demand.



Billowing columns of smoke from the tin mills meant work for thousands of immigrants who settled in New Castle near the turn of the century.

Sometimes advertisements called for specific ethnic groups for particular jobs, reflecting the pervasive notion of the time that each race was uniquely suited for a certain type of work. A steel company in Pittsburgh, for example, ran this advertisment in a 1909 newspaper: "Tinners, Catchers, and Helpers. To work in open shops. Syrians, Poles, and Romanians preferred."

James Allay, 73, has first-hand experience of such race-based practices. He is a New Castle resident whose parents came from present-day Syria to work in the tin mills. He reported that Syrians were considered "second-class citizens." "I remember when I got hired they asked your nationality . . . they put me in the hot mills right away . . . . They classified the Irish, the English, the Welsh, the Germans, the Blacks, and so forth. They used to classify at that time on what jobs they were suited to." Allay's wife, Frances, remembers being called "hunkie" when she was in school. This was a derogatory term used by "real Americans" to refer to Eastern Europeans. The expression came to describe all components of the "new immigration including Arabs, Italians, and southern Europeans. New Castle's

Syrians could take small comfort in the fact that they were not the only ones being singled out.

PHOTO: ANTHONY TOTH

Frances and James Allay, members of New Castle's Alawi community.

By 1910, there were at least 200 New Castle residents of Syrian origin.[2] The language difference threw up immediate hurdles for the newcomers, starting with the handling of Arabic names. Government census takers translated the Arabic name Assad as Esid and Acid. On the 1910 census rolls for New Castle some of the Syrian names are listed as "Cerian" and others as "Serian," despite their decidedly un-Slavic names—Kahlil, Hassan, Abdul, and so forth.

Some of the immigrants were listed with what seemed like two first names: Joe Mike, Charlie Jim, and Albert Sam, for example. "The reason for this," according to one explanation, "is that when they arrived in New Castle, they used only one name. In Syria, they were usually known by their father's name. Thus, a man named Yusef ibn-Ibrahim (Joseph, son of Abraham) in Syria, would become Joe Abraham in New Castle.[3]

Not surprisingly, the early Syrian community was relatively young (only 17 of the 191 listed on the census were older than 33) and

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Rows of neat working-class homes slope down into the valley in which New Castle is built.

predominantly male (the ratio was about 2:1). These characteristics reflected the fact that there was a significant percentage (28) of single male boarders, most of whom worked in the tin mills and lived with Syrian families. Like the other immigrant communities, the Syrians clustered among their own people near the factories and mills along the Shenango river on New Castle's south side. They lived so close to the towering smokestacks and railroad tracks that the noises and smells of the smoke and machines intruded on every moment of their daily lives. Their houses were wood-framed and usually two-story with a porch and small yard in which they planted vegetables and grape arbors. Several Syrian families took in boarders to bring in a few extra dollars a month. In one house on Mahoning Avenue there were two Syrian families and 15 boarders. Such a large number of men could share rooms and even beds since they worked different shifts at the mills which operated 24 hours a day. The women of the house were constantly busy cooking, cleaning, washing, and shopping for their families and boarders. Some of the boarders stayed on for just a few years and returned to their villages with the money they saved. Others would settle in the neighborhood, often marrying a Syrian bride from the community or bringing one back from the old country.

By 1910, the Arabic-speaking community included 29 children who were born in the United States. Though their parents were laborers and merchants for the most part, this first generation, fully fluent in English, would start joining the professions by the 1920s and 1930s. In 1910, however, two-thirds of the 101 working-age males (16 and older) reported that they worked in the mills. There were 21 peddlers, two of whom were women. Several Syrians worked as fruit merchants, including the Deep and Nadder families. Elias Khoury was a laborer, Samuel Habib a stone contractor, Assad Farris ran a confectionary store, and Jamil Rabeeah owned a coffee house.

The three main religions among New Castle's Syrians were the Maronite, Antiochian (Greek) Orthodox, and Alawi Muslim. The Alawi community is unique because there were relatively few Arab Muslims who settled in the United States prior to World War II.

The Alawi sect of Islam is one of several Shi'a denominations. It is noted for its reverence accorded to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, and the man all Shi'ites believe, in contrast to Sunni Muslims, to be the rightful successor to Muhammad as the spirtual leader of the Islamic community. Otherwise, the beliefs and rituals of the Alawis are secret, and fully initiated adults are sworn under oath not to reveal aspects of their religion to non-Alawis.

The heartland of the Alawis is the Jabal Ansariyah, a 70-mile mountain chain which runs north and south between the Mediterranean coastal plain and the Orontes River in Syria. The original Alawi immigrants to New Castle came from the villages of Bourj Safita, Drakeesh, and Hosn, all of which are about 20 miles inland from the ancient fishing port town of Tartus in Syria. Modern Tartus is approximately 25 miles up the coast from Tripoli and 50 miles south of Latakia, Syria's main port.

The older members of New Castle's Arab-American community recall the early days with fondness, for the different religious groups enjoyed a cordial togetherness based on a common language, culture and experience. They lived in the same neighborhood, celebrated as a community, worked in the same factories, and shopped at each other's stores. James Allay, an Alawi, says his father Abraham ran a store on Mahoning Avenue and acted as a banker for the Arab-speaking community. This was not an uncommon practice among immigrant groups who felt more comfortable keeping their money in a place where language would not be a barrier to its retrieval "Anybody who spoke Arabic, be they Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, they gave him their money and he kept it in a safe," Allay said. Syrians would visit each other, going to a different house every evening. "It was like a picnic every day," according to Nazera Haned, 62. "We used to do good," says 97-year-old Sam Hammet of the togetherness

The flood of 1913 forced many New Castle Arab-Americans to move from their homes near the Shenango River to higher ground on the city's south side.

of the Syrians. When there were picnics on Sundays down in a field by Mahoning Avenue, "they all act just like one family," he said.

The first major shift in the settlement of the community occurred when the Shenango River and the Neshannock Creek, which intersect in downtown New Castle, flooded on March 27, 1913, after two days of continuous rain. The Shenango tin mill was evacuated, four bridges were swept away and there were substantial losses of property and merchandise. Those living near the mills in the flood plain had to move uphill along Long Avenue, but New Castle's south side still remains the center of the Syrian community.

When the United States became involved in World War I, recent immigrants volunteered for service in the army and were quickly sent to the front, despite the fact that they spoke little or no English. Sam Hammet was one of those recruits. He had arrived in the United States in 1913 at the age of 25. Five years later, after just a few weeks of training, his army unit was shipped out to France, where he fought and was wounded. After recovering from his injuries, he was sent back to the front until the war ended. Other Syrian war veterans included Haje Hanned and Charles Monsour.

## The Syrian Community, 1920-1950

After World War I, there was a drop in Syrian immigration to the United States coinciding with the ending of open immigration. Henceforth, the growth of New Castle's Syrian community would depend on the increase in the size of the families and the transplanting of Syrians already in the United States.

During this period, some Arab-Americans became active in the labor movement. James Allay was a shop steward in a Chicago steel plant and Jack Moses, who is now 90, helped organize a union at the Jones and Laughlin steel mill in Aliquippa. Moses had to change his name to Jack Miller and move from one address to another to stay out of reach of company guards. He contacted Polish, Croatian, Italian, Slovak, and Syrian social clubs in his pursuit of unionization in 1930. Moses's refusal to cease his organizing attempts eventually led to his dismissal. A few years later he settled in New Castle and worked at the tin mills.

Difficulties sometimes stood in the way for those among the first American-born generation who aspired to professional careers. James Allay says that when his son expressed an interest in going to medical school, his principal called Allay and suggested that if he didn't "know" someone who could smooth the way, his son would have little chance of pursuing his medical studies.

By and large, though, the interwar period was marked by an increasing degree of assimilation, and some of the children of the community adopted English exclusively. But there was also a nurturing of old country traditions and practices. While many Arab-Americans continued to work at the tin mills (which remained in operation until World War II) and in businesses, others dabbled in agriculture, buying or leasing land on the outskirts of the city.

Farming benefitted the community when the Great Depression hit. Sam Hammet, for example, worked on the family's 120-acre rented farm in nearby Eastbrook. He remembers secretly leaving potatoes at the doorstep of a hungry family during the Depression and lending money to whomever needed it. John Hamed roasted three to four lambs a year at his Fern Mill farm to help feed the hungry. The Andys and the Sallies were other Syrian families that opened their larders to others during this difficult time. Some Arab-Americans like Albert Sallie made it through these years working on the Works Progress Administration crews in the area.

Oddly enough, the Depression years were the ones during which the community's religious and social institutions were founded. In 1930, the Alawis formed El-Fityet Aliween, the Alawi Youth, and the Maronites founded the Church of St. John the Baptist. The Antiochian (Greek) Orthodox Church of St. Elias was established in 1933.[4] As for other ethnic groups, the places of worship of the Arab-Americans served social functions as well, and members of different

PHOTO: ANTHONY TOTH

This list of Alawis who served in the armed forces hangs in the Alaween Club.

PHOTO: ANTHONY TOTH

Samra and Sam Hamett hold a photo showing them at a younger age.

PHOTO: ANTHONY TOTH

Mary Andy still remembers the faces in a 1939 photo of El-Fityet Alaween. Omar Abdoe looks on.

Albert Sallie, (far right) a New Castle Alawi, worked on a WPA crew in a quarry near the city.

faiths attended each others' dinners, dances, and picnics. The annual picnic of the Alawi Youth was one of the most well-attended of the regular gatherings. Syrians and non-Syrians would gather from nearby Ohio and as far away as New York to join in the weekend festivities. With their churches and social organizations well established, the Arab-Americans of New Castle joined other ethnic groups in holiday parades down the city's main street. The young couples of the community married in their churches, or if they were Muslim, under the supervision of a sheikh. Funerals, too, were carried out in the traditions of the old country. Arabic inscriptions and photographs of the deceased on the gravestones can be found today in New Castle cemeteries.

Some of the flavor of Syrian life in the 1930s has been preserved in a Works Progress Administration paper about ethnic groups in New Castle. Part II, Chapter 5 of "Tin Plate Town" is about the Syrians and reads, in part:

> *Appreciating the benefits offered by a democratic form of government and the ideals it stood for, they have not been slow in adopting the government and its principles and swearing allegiance to it. About eighty percent of the Syrian-born residents of New Castle are naturalized citizens. About fifty percent of New Castle Syrians are property holders, and as such aid in the support of the city's government. As is typical of the Syrian people, criminal and civil offences are rare, as are separation and divorce.*
>
> *They are engaged here in New Castle in the professions of medicine, preaching, nursing, and teaching; they are occupied in the various businesses of selling dry goods, groceries, meat, confectionary, and in tailoring, dry cleaning, restaurant keeping and in the rug and linen business. There are, too, Syrian painters, barbers, office workers and government employees. In industrial activities, many are employed by the tin-mill, the National Pants Company and Shenango Pottery.*
>
> *A number of Syrian-born residents are attending or have attended citizenship and other classes in night schools; some have even attended the public schools. Most of the Syrians who emigrated to America and New Castle had recieved education in Syria and some were prepared as teachers. The American-born children attend public schools, high schools and colleges. Quite a few have excelled in their school work attaining prominence in scholarship and athletics. The Syrian people appreciate the value of education and do not hesitate to provide it for their children as much as finances will permit.*[5]

The early 1940s saw many of the Arab-American community's young men sent to fight in World War II. These years formed a watershed for New Castle for another reason: just before the war, the tin mill finally closed down for good. What had been the largest single source of employment for half a century was no more, replaced by plants in other parts of the country that were automated and more efficient. As a large part of the community's economy shifted from industry, Arab-Americans moved into the medical profession with impressive strength; they became politicians, educators, businessmen, and merchants. Their settlement pattern became a bit more scattered, with younger members of the family moving to other parts of town. Yet to this day, there remains a core of south-side Arab-Americans.

## Asserting Ethnic Pride

By Eric Hooglund

New Castle has experienced significant changes since 1945. The closing of the tin mills was an economic shock from which the city still has not fully recovered more than 40 years later. Other industries generally have not prospered; the steel mill, for example, shut down during the recent recession. The obvious signs of the erosion of New Castle's industry are the empty factories and stores. In addition, the population has declined by one-third since World War II, falling from 48,000 to only 33,000 today. This loss has not been the result of urban flight to suburban towns in surrounding Lawrence County (although there has been some residential development outside of New Castle), but the consequence of continuous migration away from the area to states where there have been more job opportunities.

Third-generation Arab-Americans, the grandchildren of the turn of the century "Syrian" immigrants, have been greatly affected by New Castle's generally depressed economy since they grew up in the 1940s, '50s and '60s when job opportunities were declining. Their parents recognized the importance of education but most of the children, after graduating from high school and/or college had to leave the region in order to find work appropriate to their training. Some of them, however, have been determined to remain in New Castle to raise their own fourth-generation children in the area where their immigrant ancestors established roots. Those who have chosen

Three generations of Alawi women pose on the back porch of Jora Sallie's house.

PHOTO: ANTHONY TOTH

to live and work in their home town generally understand how New Castle has been changing from being an industrial center to being a business and service center, and they have contributed specialized talents and education to the development of the new economic base.

The transformation of small specialty stores, groceries, and Syrian restaurants into business establishments serving all of New Castle was actually initiated by second generation entreprenuers. Thus, the Beshara, Joseph, and Moses families were successfully expanding into shopping centers and supermarkets while the third generation was being raised and coming of age. In the same period, the Hamed, Gabriel, George, Latouf, and Monsour families opened modern restaurants, with an ethnic flavor, to be sure, but attracting a diverse clientele. Other major businesses include the East Side Pharmacy belonging to Chris Assid, and Michael Mansour's automotive shop. For all these enterprises third-generation Arab-Americans now provide important managerial skills.

Whether mill workers or businessmen, the parents encouraged their third-generation children to obtain a college degree and enter the professions. The prominent presence of Arab-Americans in education, finance, law and medicine in New Castle is testimony to how well parental advice has been heeded.

Since love of family and a deep appreciation for their heritage have been primary motivations for third-generation Arab-Americans to remain in New Castle, it is not surprising to find many of them actively involved in affirming their own ethnic identity. One means of doing this has been to continue certain cultural traditions, especially the serving of ethnic foods and the observance of special religious rituals. Another way has been to maintain various degrees of contact

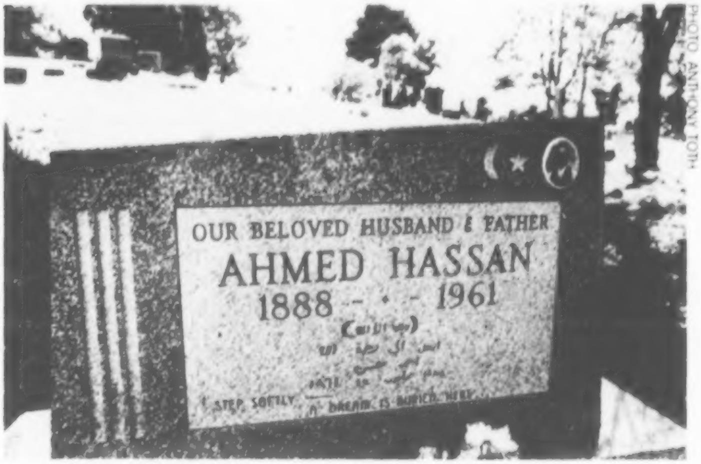
OUR BELOVED HUSBAND & FATHER
AHMED HASSAN
1888 - • - 1961
STEP SOFTLY — A DREAM IS BURIED HERE

PHOTO ANTHONY TOTH

Gravestones inscribed in Arabic mark the resting places of many of New Castle's Alawis at Valley View Cemetery.

with ancestral villages in the old country. This is best exemplified in the support which has been given to the American Hosn Hospital Organization (AHHO) for the past 25 years. The primary goal of AHHO has been to collect funds to construct a free hospital in the Syrian village of Hosn. Parishioners of St. Elias Church and members of the Aliween Club have worked especially hard on this project.

AHHO was initiated by elders and second-generation Arab-Americans in New Castle and New Kensington as a means of honoring their parents and their roots. Amen Hassen, who has been active in AHHO since its inception, is typical. Currently the principal of Ben Franklin Junior High School in New Castle, his own father, Ismail Hassen—the first president of AHHO—had come from Hosn before World War I and worked all his life in the tin mills. Despite his lack of formal education, Ismail Hassen instilled in his American-born children a deep respect for their cultural heritage. In reflecting on his own role in AHHO, Amen Hassen says: "Each and every thing that I do, and I say this in an unselfish way, is done in a positive manner, just as my father taught me and I taught my children."

AHHO and other philanthropic efforts demonstrate the concern of New Castle's Arab-Americans for the welfare of distant kin in the villages of Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Inevitably, this concern has broadened to include sensitivity to the negative media images of developments in those countries, and in the Middle East in general.

For many of New Castle's third generation, the values and traditions which they learned from their parents and grandparents—values and traditions which were cherished—did not accord at all with the way Middle Eastern culture was portrayed in the media. There was a growing feeling throughout the 1970s that something positive needed to be done to counteract the distortions about Arabs and their American cousins.

When ADC was formed with the announced goal of becoming a grass-roots organization in communities with Arab-American populations, several New Castle residents welcomed the ideals of ADC enthusiastically. Three men, Omar Abdoe, Dr. Ahmad Abul-Ela, and Dr. Ronald Joseph, formed the New Castle ADC chapter in 1982 and immediately set to work recruiting members.

Abdoe is the grandson of immigrants from the village of Bourj Safita, Syria. He would become the coordinator of the New Castle chapter and serve for two years as ADC's Western Pennsylvania Regional Representative. Reflecting on his role in ADC, Abdoe said: "I owe a particular debt to my father, Albert Abdoe, for he is the one who instilled in me the sensitivity to, and awareness of, the Arab culture and requirements we face. At a very early age—as far back as I can remember—he would sit me, my brother, and sister down to explain the problems we face.

"Today I consider myself most fortunate to have played whatever small role I did in seeking to rally the people around the theme that we're Arab-Americans and proud of it. We expect no more, but will accept no less than that accorded other ethnic groups both here and abroad. Together, there is nothing we can't do. The problems we share and the obstacles we face are far too important to remain unchallenged . . . .We consider it our duty and responsibility to our ancestors, as well as to our descendants, to promote our cultural heritage and correct the gross misrepresentations of Arab history and Middle East realities."

Dr. Ahmad Abul-Ela, a practicing surgeon, was born in Egypt and came to New Castle in the 1970s. He was a founder, and is currently director, of the Islamic Society of Greater New Castle. He is deeply concerned about preserving cultural heritage and informing people about Arab affairs. As a member of the chapter steering committee, he views ADC as a "excellent vehicle through which Arab-Americans can show the entire community the richness of their cultural heritage, as well as express their concerns." After the chapter was fully functioning, Dr. Abul-Ela noted that ADC had "brought the entire

Straining for the correct answer, children come for Arabic instruction every Sunday. While their owners learn Arabic, sneakers and saddle shoes wait near the door of Dr. Ahmad Abul Ela's office.

PHOTO ANTHONY TOTH

Arab-American community together . . . .[and] heightened its visability."

Dr. Ronald Joseph, the third co-founder of the local ADC chapter, was a New Castle native whose grandparents had immigrated from a village in the Mount Lebanon district of central Lebanon. His father operated a grocery store on Mill Street which later expanded into a supermarket. Dr. Joseph was the first of his family to obtain a college education, and he became a dentist. He was active in his church, St. John the Baptist, a civic leader committed to the redevelopment of New Castle and concerned about issues affecting Arab-Americans. Unfortunately, Dr. Joseph died unexpectedly in November 1984 at the young age of 43. According to his close friend, Omar Abdoe: "Dr. Joseph always showed a deep appreciation for Arab-American interests. He was an active member of ADC who gave himself unselfishly when called upon. His example was an inspiration to us all."

The New Castle chapter grew rapidly and soon had a steering committee comprised of prominent members of the community: Dr. Abul-Ela, James Beshero, Mitchell Charles, Jr., Eugene Gabriel, Jr., Faith Hassan, Amen Hassen, Corgette Joseph, Lawrence Kelly, Dr. Mohammed Naji, and Jora Hamed Pallot. The chapter has been very active during the past three years. During 1982 it sponsored dinners to raise money to help children in Lebanon who were injured during the Israeli invasion. Subsequently, it sponsored a youth, Ali Ghosn, who came from Lebanon in his wheel chair to recieve specialized medical treatment in the New Castle area. The Naji family hosted Ali Ghosn during his stay in the U.S. For the past two successive years, Fatmeh Ghazzawi, victim of Chatila, is greeted by New Castle ADC member Mary Ann Hanna in 1983.

Left to right: ADC members Corgette Joseph, Mitchell Charles, George Fregone, chairman of Lawrence County Organized Labor Association, and ADC coordinator Omar K. Abdoe. The basket contains food purchased for the needy in Lawrence County with money raised by the ADC chapter there in 1983.

The New Castle ADC donated a copy of Volume One of *Taking Root, Bearing Fruit* to the New Castle Public Library in 1984. From the left: Delores Grossman of the library staff and Amen and Katherine Hassen of ADC.

the New Castle chapter also has succeeded in getting a proclamation of an annual Arab-American Day in Lawrence County. ADC participated in 1985 in the first Folk Festival sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce. It has contributed to the food bank drive sponsored by the Lawrence County Organized Labor Association. And it has undertaken political outreach, including establishing regular channels of contact with New Castle's congressional representatives. In all these efforts a dedicated core of members has worked hard to ensure the success of each project. These members include James and Frances Allay, Watfa Essa, Mitchell Charles, Jr., Lorraine Gabriel, Mary Ann Hanna, Faith Hassan, Elaine Jacobs, Ruth Joseph, Alamaza Latouf, Elaine Mansour, and Ghada Naji.

A major result of ADC's efforts to promote cultural and political awareness has been the Arab-American Days in 1984 and 1985. These were occasions for New Castle's Alawi and Sunni Muslims and Maronite and Orthodox Christians to join together as one community, sharing pride in their Arab-American heritage. In both years, there were all-day picnics featuring the classic foods of the old country, and everyone was invited to dance the dabkeh. In 1984 Jack Moses was named Arab-American Man of the year, and in 1985 Sam Hammet was similarly honored. The festivities were well-attended by members of New Castle's other ethnic communities. Indeed, the Chairman of the Lawrence County Commission read official proclamations recognizing the contributions of the Arab-Americans to the community. This was a fitting acknowledgement of the significant role Arab-Americans have come to play in New Castle. ◆

## Notes

1. "Report of the Division of Immigration and Unemployment," *First Annual Report.* Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, 1913, p. 233. Cited in Caroline Golab, *Immigrant Destinations*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977, p. 35.

2. Demographic information on the early Syrian community in New Castle is taken from the manuscripts of the 1910 U.S. Census, National Archives, Washington, D.C. The census lists 191 residents of Syrian background, but there were certainly more since residents have reported that census lists are incomplete.

3. Record Group 13: Records of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Works Progress Administration, Ethnic Survey; Job 126, "The Syrians," *Tin Plate Town*, Part II, Chapter V, p. 6.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

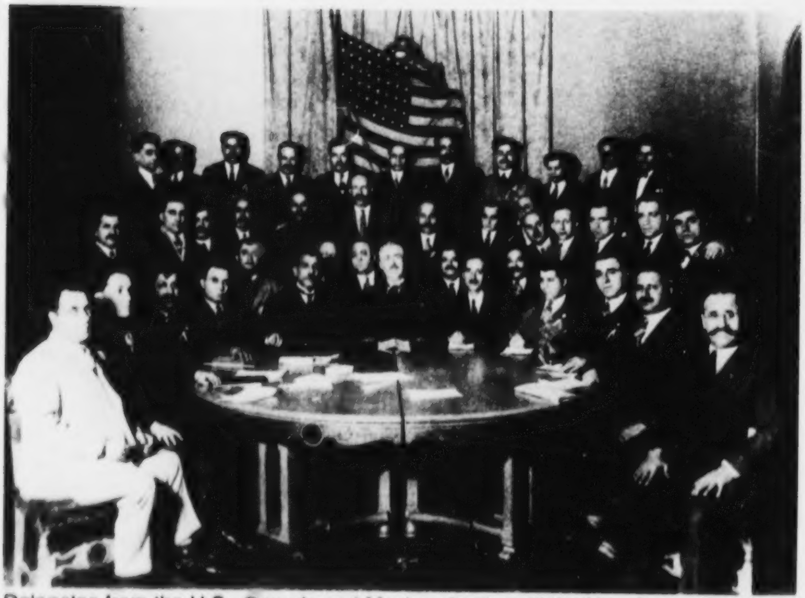

PHOTO COURTESY BOB KHOURI

Delegates from the U.S., Canada and Mexico chapters of the New Syrian Party convened in Detroit on January 15, 1927, in honor of Druze leader Shakib Arslan and Christian leader Naseem Bey Saybayeh who sought support from the Arab-American community for the Syrian resistance to French occupation.

# Mahrajan in Michigan

### By Christopher Mansour

In Flint people have been making cars for more than 80 years. This medium-sized manufacturing center (1980 population: 160,000) is located about 60 miles northwest of Detroit. Its first automobile factory, which manufactured Buicks, was built in 1904. And in the same year Billy Durant began putting the Flint carriage-making shops together as the General Motors Corporation. The automobile brought major growth to Flint, which in 1900 was a small town noted for its production of horse-drawn carriages. Within 30 years it had grown to a city of nearly 150,000 residents, most of whom derived their livelihoods directly or indirectly from the new horse-less carriages. Although General Motors Corporation later moved its headquarters to Detroit, it factories continue to dominate Flint's industry to this day.

Flint's rapid growth spurred immigration to the city in the early decades of the 20th century. Among the thousands of people who settled in Flint were several hundred Arabs. Most of them came to work in the automobile plants which were offering relatively high wages. Some later left factory work to open small businesses in downtown Flint. The Arab community of Flint has continued to grow. Today, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 Arab-Americans live in Flint and suburban Genese county.

## *Arab Pioneers*

The majority of the early Arab immigrants in Flint came from a few towns and villages in southern Lebanon and northern Palestine, all of them within 50 miles of one another. With courage and faith, they decided to leave their homes in the old country, where their families had lived for generations, travel thousands of miles by stagecoach, steamship and train, and resettle in the New World. Most had no education or money and did not understand the language and culture of the new country. For that reason they tended to cluster in urban Flint neighborhoods with other families who had lived next to each other in the same town or village in Lebanon or Palestine.

Charlie Joseph (Shahadeh Yousef Jalbout) and his family are believed to be the first Arabs to settle in Flint. Charlie was the oldest of four sons who inherited equal shares of their father's three-acre farm in Khiyam, Mariyoun, south Lebanon. Instead of farming such a tiny plot of land, Joseph chose to emigrate to the United States with his young wife. They landed at Ellis Island in September 1901 in the midst of the uproar over President McKinley's assassination. They had neither a sponsor nor a place to go. Charlie remembered that someone from their village was then living in Lowell, Massachusetts. He gave the name of this "cousin" to the immigration officials who passed them through. The Josephs stayed through the winter in Lowell, then moved to Saginaw, Michigan, in the spring of 1902. Chairlie worked as a peddler in the surrounding rural areas, walking from farm to farm carrying a suitcase full of household goods, sleeping in barns and eating meals in his customers' houses. With the money he saved from peddling, Chairlie opened a dry goods store in Gaylord, Michigan, in the heart of lumber country. When the store failed, he returned to Saginaw and took up peddling again.

In 1904, Charlie decided to move with his wife and four children to Flint. He got a job on the construction crews building the new Buick factory in the north end of Flint. In a few months, Charlie had accumulated enough money to buy a parcel of land on the corner of Parkland Street and Industrial Avenue, right across from the new Buick plant. This would later become the heart of the Arab section in Flint.

Charlie began by selling fruit from a basket to the auto workers as they went into the plant for the first shift at 4:00 A.M. and gradually expanded, first building a small shack, later adding a store with apartments above it, until soon he was renting out a string of stores and apartments in the North End as well as several houses and a gasoline station.

Many Arab immigrants who came later would rent their first apartment or house from Charlie Joseph. He advised them on financial matters, co-signed for their loans from the bank, stood as godfather for their children and was generally considered the patron of the Arabs in Flint. His older sons, Joseph and George, went to college and became lawyers for the Arab community. Joe Joseph was elected prosecuting attorney for Flint in the early 1930s and is believed to be one of the very first Arab-Americans to hold elected office.

Unfortunately, Charlie Joseph met an early death. In 1934, he was struck and killed by an automobile as he was returning from his farm just north of Flint. Despite the urban property he owned, he maintained that his farm gave him the most pleasure. To the end, he remained at heart, an Arab peasant from south Lebanon.

The Arab immigrants who followed Chairlie Joseph were drawn to Flint, along with a multitude of other ethnic immigrants, by the booming General Motors automobile factories. Many Arab immigrants found jobs in the Buick factory on Industrial Avenue that Charlie Joseph had helped to build.

Flint was not the first destination of the majority of the early Arab immigrants when they came to America. Some came to Flint from other cities such as Detroit, Saginaw and Lansing. Others traveled from cities as far away as St. Louis, Missouri, and Syracuse, New York.

PHOTO COURTESY BOB KHOURI

George (Nazir) Farah came to Flint in 1913. Here he is pictured with his American wife, Violet (left) and another family member (center) at the Farah family home in Nazareth, Palestine, in 1923.

George Sayigh and George (Nazir) Farah from Nazareth, Palestine, were typical of many of the early immigrants to Flint. They were living in Syracuse, New York, in 1913 when they read newspaper advertisements from "Uncle Henry" Ford offering wages of $5 per day in the Ford auto factories in Detroit—the average wage at that time was between $5 and $7 per week. However, when they arrived in Detroit, they were unable to obtain the coveted Ford jobs. After spending several months sleeping in box cars and eating apples from nearby orchards, they headed north to Flint where they found work in the Buick plant.

Factory work was not Flint's only drawing card. Family or village ties also attracted the immigrants to this industrial boom town. One of the reasons Sayigh and Farah decided to come to Flint was the presence of Charlie (Bishara) Farah, who had been in Flint for several years. In turn, these men encouraged several other Palestinians living in Syracuse—Naif Khouri, Tony and Kamal Ghantous, Amin Farah, Tom (Tawfiq) Mansour, and William Okal—to move.

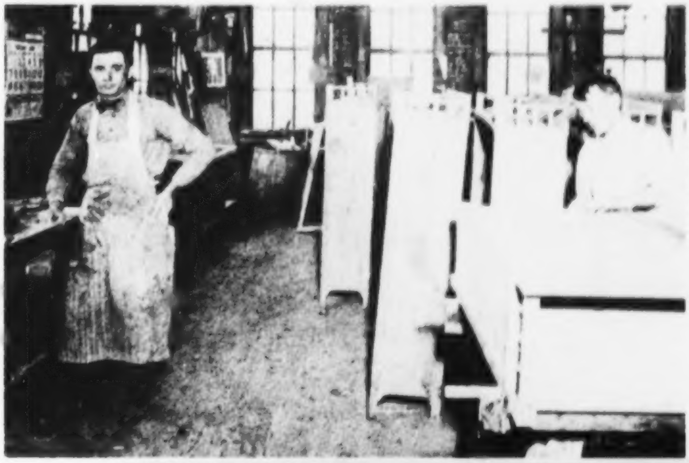

PHOTO: COURTESY BOB KHOURI

PHOTO: COURTESY BOB KHOURI

Top: Naif Khoury in his cabinet shop in Syracuse, N.Y., before he moved to Flint in 1915. Bottom: Tony Ghantous (left) and Ameen Farah (second from left) with clerks in their Flint grocery in the late 1920s.

As more Arab families and single men arrived in Flint in the during the 1910s, an entire neighborhood was established. A "little Syria" grew up in the North End near the Buick factory where many of the men had jobs. The Arab factory workers were predominantly, but not exclusively, Maronites from villages in southern Lebanon. Druze from the village of Baakhline, Lebanon, also worked in the Buick factory and lived in the North End. Flint's booming economy encouraged some Arabs to try their luck in business. Several opened grocery stores. The majority of shopkeepers, in contrast, were Greek Orthodox or Maronites from the Palestinian town of Nazareth. A few Lebanese Druze who had started out in the factories were also involved in commercial activities. In the North End, enterprising Arabs ran grocery stores, coffee houses, bakeries, pool halls, gas stations, and rooming houses. However, because most business was conducted downtown near the river and the railroad yards, most of the early entrepreneurs relocated their shops and tended not to live in the North End but sought the residential neighborhoods in the east end of Flint.

PHOTO COURTESY BOB KHOURI

Mr. and Mrs. Mike Farah in their Flint grocery about 1920.

The decade 1915 - 1925 saw Flint's Arab community expand rapidly. Not only were new Arab families moving from other American cities, but the young single men who had come earlier felt economically secure enough to bring wives and other family members over from the old country. Typical of this pattern is the Farah family from Nazareth. Charlie Farah had come to Flint with his wife in 1912 and was quickly followed by George and Amin Farah. Amin started a partnership with Naif Khouri and together they established a chain of small grocery stores. By 1920, Amin felt prosperous enough to send for his fiancee, Farouz Farah, her brother Sam and nine other family members from Nazareth.

Sam Farah still remembers the grueling 74-day trip from Nazareth to Flint. He recalls that the family set out by coach from Nazareth for Jerusalem to get passports. Then they went to Port Said, Egypt, to board the *Tampa Maro*, a Japanese steamship bound for Marseilles and London. From London they took the *SS Canada*, landing not at Ellis Island, but in Portland, Maine. Amin Farah met the party in Portland, married Farouz in a local church, and the whole group then traveled on to Flint by train.

Sam recalled that the large tin of *lebani* and olive oil which Farouz had carried all the way from Nazareth for her new husband sprang a leak and had to be discarded in Portland.

Assad Massoud Rizik followed a very differnt route to Flint. He and his wife left their village in the Jezzine area of south Lebanon around the beginning of the 20th century and sailed to Mexico. He worked in the plantations of northern Mexico until 1914, when he moved his family to St. Louis, Missouri. After working in the Grand Ledo Hotel in St. Louis for three years, Rizik moved his family one more time, to Flint, in 1917. He rented a building on Parkland Street and Industrial Avenue from Charlie Joseph and opened an Arab coffeehouse and restaurant. Rizik's coffeehouse was patronized by the autoworkers from the Buick factory across the street, the downtown merchants and the City Hall politicians seeking votes and good food. His son Michael (Mitch) Rizik recalled how his father would sing and play the *oud* in his coffeehouse and at many *mahrajans* in Flint and other Michigan cities.

Jack Hamady came directly from his native village of Baakhaline, Lebanon, to Flint in 1920. His father had come to the United States earlier, in 1908, when Jack was an infant, and had worked on the beet farms in Michigan for two years before settling in Flint and opening a grocery store in partnership with his brother. After World War I, Jack's father returned to Lebanon to fetch his wife and son. Jack recalls working in the store, then in the North End. In later years, Jack and his brothers would expand the store into the large chain of Hamady Brothers Supermarkets.

## Keeping Traditions in Flint

Between 1925 and 1945 the Arabs of Flint took root as an American community. As the community was becoming assimilated, it did not forget its heritage. Religious and social institutions helped to preserve a feeling of identity with the traditions of the immigrant generation. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Assad Rizik's coffee house was a main gathering place where the men met to gossip and talk politics.

There was much interest in developments in the old Country. After World War I, the homeland had been divided into three separate nations: Lebanon and Syria, which were ruled by France, and Palestine, which was under British control. Arab newspapers from New York kept people informed about the latest events and provided material for many spirited conversations.

Since many of Flint's Arabs had emigrated from Palestine, there was keen interest in the situation there. The Palestinian Arabs wanted an independent country but the British rulers insisted that, being "Asians," they needed supervision. This was the age of European imperialism. The British were allowing European Jews to immigrate to Palestine to establish their own homeland there. The inevitable tension between Palestinians and European colonists led to violence in the 1920s, and a full-scale uprising on the part of the Palestinians against the British in 1936 - 1939. Concerned Flint citizens collected clothing and raised money for food and medicine to send to Palestine. On two occasions, once in 1924 and again in 1948, they donated ambulances.

French activities in Lebanon and Syria were also frequent topics of conversation in Rizik's coffeehouse. France's partitioning Lebanon from Syria was hotly debated in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the men of Flint declared themselves supporters of the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP), which called for the unification of Lebanon and Syria under a secular and independent central government. Some even attended American conventions of the Party held in Detroit. The rift over the Lebanon issue eventually caused the American-Syrian-Lebanese Club to split. Also in 1927, when the leader of the Druze in Lebanon, Shekib Arslan, toured the United States, he paid a visit to his "constituents" in Flint.

The talk at Rizik's coffeehouse was not all political. The men played cards and backgammon there, cut business deals, planned haflehs, mahrajans and community picnics at the Flint Waterworks or Gautty Lake, or just listened to Arabic music. The coffeehouse was the gathering place where the immigrants reminisced about the past and dreamed of the future. It also served as a place for socializing the first American-born generation into some of the traditions of their Arab culture.

Religious associations were equally important for preserving ethnic identity. The Arabs who settled in Flint were adherents of three religious communities long associated with Syria: the Maronite Catholics, the Antiochian Greek Orthodox and the Druze Muslims. The first Maronites in Flint attended church services in the city's Roman Catholic parishes. In the early 1920s, the Maronite men organized a fraternal group called the American Lebanese Society, and in 1927 their wives formed a parallel group known as the American Lebanese Morning Star Society. Visiting Maronite priests, like Father Michael Abraham of Sacred Heart Church in Michigan City, celebrated Maronite-rite masses every three or four months in the clubhouse that the two organizations shared until the 1930s.

The Antiochian Orthodox families organized a religious association in the early 1920s and held services in a rented room whenever an Arabic-speaking Orthodox priest visited Flint. In 1936, Saint George Syrian Orthodox Church was founded, and the first church on North Saginaw Street was completed in 1939. The Druze, who were much fewer in number than the Orthodox and the Maronites, did not have a formal religious organization during this period. Their sect does not require a mosque for worship, and the Druze in Flint did not feel the need to change in this regard. However, a Druze social club, the American Druze Society, was maintained in Flint during the late 1920s and 1930s.

During this period, there was a real sense of community among the Arab-Americans in Flint. Aside from the importance of religious ties, Arab immigrants and their families also met socially. The Bakoura Club was formed in the late 1930s as a general association which all the Arab-Americans could join. This new club added to the reminders of the heritage that these immigrants all shared. Certainly Rizik's coffeehouse and the Arabic bakeries nearby (where bread was made "the old fashioned way") were symbols of the old country, and it now seemed only natural that those who shared this ancient secular Arab culture should come together to celebrate it.

There was reason to celebrate, too, at the passing of the depression years. During this time of hardship for many in the community, it was almost unheard of for one among them to go on public assistance. They did almost any type of work to get by, for it was an indellible mark of shame to go on welfare. Everyone in the community abided by this code, and it was habitual in those lean years for the community to fulfill their social responsibility and pitch in to keep one of their own off the dole.

From the late 1920s until the mid-1930s a number of social organizations came into being. The Al-Hamra Club started as a social organization, but later took on the role of raising funds to aid the resistance against the French occupation of Syria. The Phoenician Club organized a softball team that competed against amateur teams from Lansing, Bay City, Michigan City and Detroit. On Sunday afternoons, some congregated at the American Lebanese clubhouse and others gathered at Jack Shaheen's for a game of *tawileh* under the grape arbor Shaheen had built to remind him of his anscestral village of Qabqabeh, Lebanon. Still others stopped in at cousin Tom Shaheen's, where the rival Shaheens and Riziks played ball in the back yard.

In the 1930s, Arabic was still spoken widely in the Flint. The immigrants and those Arab-Americans born in Flint recognized the need to speak English as much as possible if they were going to assimilate. As an ethnic community, the Arab-Americans they strove to become an integral part of their society. Many attended night school in order to improve their language and professional skills.

Some who remember those early days in Flint recall no particular prejudice against them as Arabs. There existed, rather, general discrimination against all foreigners at that time. This situation compelled these new Americans, like so many others, to work harder in order to be equal.

In many ways assimilation presented a trade-off to the ethnic community. When newcomers were still unfamiliar with American ways, the social and economic need for cohesion among them was greater. The language barrier in the *mahjar* contributed to close relations among the Arabs. As English became the *lingua franca* for them, too, some of these relations eroded. With the coming of World War II, many Arab-Americans left the North End of Flint as the neighborhood began to decline. As they moved to newer neighborhoods, much of the old community feeling faded. In some ways, this development was the affirmation of many an immigrant's dream: to become assimilated, to educate one's children and to become self-sufficient. Arab-Americans no longer felt comfortable exclusively in the Arab environment. They had become bicultural. However, in an effort to preserve Arab ethnic heritage, six Palestinians—Tony Mansour, Sam Farah, John and Bob Khouri, Woody Mattar and Fred Okal—formed "al-Watan" social club. This organization only lasted one year, 1944-1945.

After the war one finds a great deal of professional diversification among the Arab-Americans in Flint. George and Joe Joseph (Jalbout) had entered the legal profession and were already well established by the 1940s. Like many other Arab-Americans, Mike Rizik entered the military during the war years and was in the U.S. Army's Officer Candidate School by 1945, where he received training as an accountant.

The Morning Star Society and the American Lebanese Club moved into the old Jewish Hall on McFarland Street, which was purchased in 1950. This was to be the last clubhouse. It was finally sold in 1973 and the proceeds were used as a down payment on the new Our Lady of

Lebanon Maronite Church.

Much had changed for the Arabs in Flint, as well as for their relatives back home. France had its way with Syria by establishing an independent Lebanon. Palestine had been partitioned and much of its population had already been dispersed as a result of attacks by Jewish colonial settlers. The tragedy that this caused for the people of the Middle East had its effects on the Arab-Americans, and particularly the Palestinian-Americans, of Flint.

Subhi J. "Sam" Farah came with his father to Flint from Nazareth in 1920. His father died a year later, and it was not until 1955 that he returned to his homeland to visit his mother and family. However, his mother passed away shortly before he arrived in Nazareth to see her. Sam faced this unfortunate event within the context of seeing for the first time the destruction that had come to Palestine as a result of Zionist occupation.

Although the community had remained politically dormant, many Arab-Americans in Flint felt a great deal of sympathy for those victimized by events in Palestine. This sympathy was sparked into action by the Six Day War of 1967. The Flint community responded in the form of rallies and peaceful demonstrations. Mahrajans and benefits were held to collect funds to aid Palestinians seeking refuge from the conflict. This began a tense and bitter period for Arabs in Flint and elsewhere.

In June 1967, Arab-Americans in Flint formed the "Middle East Refugee Relief Fund" to collect clothing and to raise money for food and medicine for victims of the war. Sam and Roy Farah co-chaired the organization, Fay J. Joseph served as secretary, and Woody Matar acted as treasurer. Flint Township Supervisor Tom Mansour headed the charity drive. By mid-August, the first of three 1,000-pound shipments of relief supplies left Flint. Among the shipments were $20,000 worth of medicines sent through Jordan to the refugees. These activities gained recognition beyond Flint as well, when Sam Farah was named Humanitarian of the Year for his philanthropic work by the Michigan Federation of American Syrian-Lebanese Clubs.

The October War of 1973 moved the Arab community of Flint to action once more. It was then that ecumenical peace rallies were held at Saint George Orthodox Church. The pastor Rev. Basil Kalekas, was joined by Reverend Andrew Karas of Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, Monsignor Elias El-Hayek of Our Lady of Lebanon and Dr. Neil Leighton of the University of Michigan at Flint. The congregations sent telegrams to then President Richard Nixon and various Congressmen, urging them to intervene for peace in the Middle East.

On the local scene, in 1973 Arab-Americans rallied to protest what they saw as anti-Arab policies of the United Auto Workers Union. That year Arab-American auto workers picketed UAW President Leonard Woodcock when he was presented a national award by the B'nai B'rith.

Two years after the founding of the Maronite Church in 1973, civil war erupted in Lebanon. The descendants of the Lebanese villages of Marj'ayoun, Khiam and Jezzine were themselves drawn into a conflict that had some effect on their relations within their own Flint community. Religious friction inspired by the complex Lebanese in-fighting was evident in the community at a time when the need for unity was most pressing.

Relief work brought the Arab-Americans together again in 1975, when a nationwide effort was launched by the Antiochian Orthodox Church to raise funds for medical supplies to be sent to war victims in the Middle East. In November of that year an appeal for aid to the Lebanese was issued by the most diverse coalition of religious groups ever in Flint's history. This relief effort was joined by the Catholic Regional Council, the Druze Community, the Jewish Community Council, the Islamic community, Our Lady of Lebanon Church and Saint George Orthodox Church. With regard to this remarkable ecumenical response, Rev. Basil Kalekas announced, "Let the word go out to everyone in the world that here in Flint, Michigan, Christians, Druzes [sic], Jews and Moslems have joined in prayer for peace in Lebanon."

Politicization of the Arab-Americans of Flint was finally in progress. With the tragic developments in Palestine and Lebanon, the penchant of American society and its pundits to add insult to injury by subjecting Arabs and Arab-Americans to negative stereotyping and defamation moved many in Flint to speak out against injustice at home and in the Middle East.

In Michigan, one of the outstanding instances of defamation was the public allegation in 1975 by Patrick Clawson, Executive Director of the Saginaw Crime Commission, that Flint was controlled by a Syrian-Lebanese crime syndicate. Flintites hastened to point out that they have little influence over local decisions. This was illustrated by a resolution passed by the Flint City Council condemning the United Nations resolution that equated Zionism with other forms of racism. In 1981, Michigan Governor Miliken went public with his confused racist epithets. The national office of ADC demanded a public apology from the governor for his references to OPEC as "those damned Arabs," blaming the international petroleum cartel for Michigan's problems.

Arab-Americans all over North America were organizing and expanding already-existing organizations. In Flint, a chapter of the National Association of Arab-Americans (NAAA) was formed in 1977 with Mike al-Bayya, a local insurance agent, as president. The American Lebanese Morning Star Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. In 1980 the Flint Chapter of ADC was formed with Sylvia Sophiea as the chapter coordinator. The Flint ADC chapter has been especially active in raising money to help Lebanese and Palestinian children who were injured during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

The Arab-Americans of Flint also have been active in civic affairs. Three individuals in particular have been prominent. They are Anthony Mansour, George Nassif, and Sylvia Sophiea. Their activities, which are profiled below, demonstrate their pride in being citizens of Flint and their pride in being Americans.

**Anthony J. Mansour** has been a respected citizen of Flint for many years. He arrived nearly 60 years ago as an infant from Nazareth, Palestine, with his mother, his brother Albert and his sister Elizabeth. Tony Mansour had an exemplary academic career and earned his degree in law from Detroit Law College in 1950. He has practiced law in Flint since 1951 and was elected Circuit Court judge from 1965 to 1973. Mansour has contributed much to the Arab-American community, including his participation and leadership of several Arab-American organizations. He is a member of the NAAA, ADC and the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) and the Arab-American Institute. He also serves as an honorary member of the Board of Directors of the United Holy Land Fund and is currently vice-president of the Arab-American Bar Association. He is active in the Arab-American Republican Club in the Flint area.

**George Nassif** is another prominent Flintite who came to the area from his home town of Binghamton, New York, where his Lebanese parents settled. George has taught humanities, world history and world civilization in Flint public schools since 1968. He often acts as spokesman for the Arab-American community through public speaking before professional associations and civic groups such as the Rotary Club. George is also an active member of the NAAA and ADC.

**Sylvia M. Sophiea** came to Flint from Gregory, South Dakota, and is the daughter of Elias Abourezk of Kfayr and Rose Abousamra of Judaydat-Marjʻayoun in present day Lebanon. When Sylvia was still an infant, her father died, and her mother moved to Flint where her brother lived. Four years later, Rose Abousamra married Anton Ghantos from Haifa, Palestine. He had first come to upstate New York to work in a foundry. He came to Flint in the 1920s and establsihed a successful business.

Sylvia grew up in a civic-minded environment. Rose and Anton Ghantos exposed their children to as wide a range of subjects as possible and encourgaed them to be community oriented. Sylvia went on to study music and social work at the University of Michigan, and she has served her community in both fields. During World War II, she was a volunteer with the Red Cross and, in the 1960s, was a founder of Flint's Middle East Refugee Relief Fund. She was a social worker for 13 years and was director of the Association for Leukemia Suffering American Children (ALSAC). She also has been active with the International Institute, an organization dedicated to the resettlement, education and aid of immigrants.

Within the Arab-American community, Sylvia Sophiea has worked as choir director for Saint George Orthodox Church for 35 years. Her pride in Arab ethnic heritage and the imperative that justice be done in Palestine has driven Sylvia to remain involved in Arab and Arab-American issues. Among her current contributions is her dedication to the work of ADC, for which she serves as coordinator of the Flint chapter.

Over the past 10 years, in response to the war in Lebanon, there has been a considerable influx of new Arab immigrants into the Flint area. These newcomers represent all the religious diversity of the established community, and many have brought with them insights into the current conditions in the old country.

Although the Arab-American immigrants of the early days have achieved assimilation, the colonization and occupation of Palestine and the civil war in Lebanon have solidified community self-awareness (if not solidarity). It is this self-awareness that will continue to serve as a base for their positive action among Arab-American Flintites. ◆

PHOTO: ELEANOR DOUMATO COLLECTION

The Shabo family arrived in Central Falls from Midyat in 1912. Here Ibrahim Shabo, a weaver, is pictured with his wife Sarah and six of their nine children in Damascus in 1909. The eldest son, Assad (second from left, rear), preceded his family to America, where he worked as a dry goods merchant before being joined by his family. The eldest daughter Annie is on the far right and her husband, Mousa Ibrahim, is seated in front of her. Majida (Jennie), on the far left in front of her brother Shaye, began working in a textile mill the day after her arrival in America.

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# Celebrating Tradition in Rhode Island

### By Eleanor Doumato

David Saaty, who arrived in the city of Providence in 1886, is believed to be the first person from an Arab-speaking background to settle in Rhode Island. He had come alone to America, hoping to find a Protestant missionary whom he had known in his hometown of Mosul in present-day Iraq. With the help of his missionary friend, Saaty obtained work in William Kerr's watchmaker shop on Westminister Street. In a few years he had saved enough to send for his brother Nowman, and by 1895 the two brothers had their own watch repair business.

In 1901 they visited their home in Mosul, then part of the Ottoman Empire, and returned with an Assyrian boy named Tooma Zora who had been working in the Mosul rug bazaar. Zora later would become a prominent oriental rug merchant in Providence.[1] Over the next 20 years, a succession of cousins followed the Saatys' path to America. In this way a link that had been forged in Mesopotamia between a Protestant missionary and a Christian boy resulted in the beginnings of the Arab-American community in Rhode Island.

By the turn of the century, people from present-day Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Eastern Turkey were settling in Rhode Island. They came in two waves; the first wave lasted until the outbreak of World War I; the second, from the end of the war until 1924 when the Immigration Act came into effect. This was a law which limited immigration from any one country to a quota based upon the percentage of people from that country in the 1890 census. This act drastically reduced immigration from the Middle East, although a few immediate relatives were able to gain admittance.[2]

The vast majority of Arab-speaking newcomers to Rhode Island were Christians. However, the 1910 census for Central Falls alone contains more than 20 Muslim names, and the 1918 Rhode Island Draft Registry includes some two dozen "Turkish" Muslim names.[3]

All of these Muslims departed Rhode Island by 1920, either to resettle in other states or to return to their homeland. The Christians had immigrated from Aleppo, Damascus, and Marrah, a town on the caravan route between these two cities; from Mosul and the towns and villages of Northern Mesopotamia, a land the Rhode Island Syrians called "Bain Nahrain;" and from Tripoli and the villages of the Wadi Qadisa in northern Lebanon. They were Antiochian Orthodox, Old Syrian Orthodox, and Maronite and Melkite-rite Catholics.

Today most descendants of the Arabic-speaking pioneers in Rhode Island identify themselves ethnically with Syria or Lebanon, nation-states yet unborn when their predecessors came to America. Others define themselves in terms of the language of their parents or grandparents—Syriac-Aramaic or Arabic, or with one of the four Syrian churches. A few call themselves "Assyrian," while others wish to be called "Arab-Americans." In America at the turn of the century, however, Arabic-speaking peoples generally were called "Syrians" regardless of religion or land of origin, and in the early years they, too, for the most part used "Syrian" to define themselves ethnically in America.[4]

As early as 1905, a state census listed 379 Syrians living in Rhode Island.[5] At that time 153,156 people, almost one-third of Rhode Island's total population, were foreign-born; thus, the Arabic-speaking community was a tiny minority by comparison. By 1920, there were 1,285 foreign-born Syrians in the state, and in 1929, including American-born children, the strength of the community was estimated to have grown to 2,500.[6]

A good many of the people from Aleppo, Damascus, and Marrah, as well as those from Midyat and Mardin in eastern Turkey, were weavers by trade. For them, the textile mills of Rhode Island offered promise of employment. The mills were situated along the valley of the Blackstone River, which rises in central Massachusetts, passes through Worcester and enters northeastern Rhode Island near Woonsocket. From there the Blackstone flows southeasterly toward Central Falls and joins with the tidal Seekonk River by Pawtucket. Communities of Arabic-speaking peoples established themselves in each of these mill towns, where jobs in the factories were waiting for them.

Life in Rhode Island did not always live up to the expectations of the immigrants. As "Auntie Jennie," Majeeda Shabo Gilbert, said many years later: "They used to say we would find gold in the streets, but I was off the boat one day and in the factory the next, and I was 14 years old." If they did not find gold they always found work. In 1902 a group from Aleppo and Damascus arrived in Providence during a strike by textile workers in Olneyville, and were taken straight from the boat to the looms of the striking workers. They knew no English, but they knew they needed to work, and they ate and slept in the mill until the strike was over. From there they settled in Pawtucket and Central Falls.[7]

Melkite Catholics and Antiochian Orthodox people were among these early new-comers to Rhode Island. Some of the people who came in the early years were the Slemons, the Kandos, George Marza, George and Lillie Dakake, Michael Ma'asab, Joseph and Mary Sabbagh, Moses Kahla, George Zainyeh, the Deebo family, the Aisis family, and Zakie Nazarian. Possibly the first of the Antiochian Orthodox to come was the father of Michael Mona of Pawtucket who arrived in 1890.

People from the old Syrian Orthodox community in Aleppo and eastern Turkey, particularly Mardin and Midyat, were coming to Central Falls and Pawtucket at this time, too. They included the Danho family, Abdo Risho, the Shabo family and George Anter, who arrived in 1910, as well as Abraham Shammas who acted as sponsor for many of the Old Syrians in helping them come to America. From the village of Ma'azerte came George Malke in 1898 and John Abraham in 1904. George Anter brought his family from Aleppo in 1920 and right away opened the "Washington Pure Food Market" on Washington Street in Central Falls. The Sayegh family, who had come in 1911, operated a grocery store on the same street, where they found the French language they had learned in Damascus just as useful as English because of the French Canadians in their neighborhood. Zakie Nazarian, father of 11 children, one of whom is the acting President of Rhode Island College, started out working in the textile mills, and succeeded in establishing the "Fortune Silk Mill" which employed 30 people before the demise of the factory during the Depression.

Moses Kahla went from working as a laborer to owning a small grocery to starting an ice delivery business. His wife Jameila had been indentured to the owners of a New York garment factory who had paid her passage to America. She was only 12 years old, and because she was under age to be working, she was obliged to hide in a box, sometimes for hours at a time, to escape the notice of the inspectors who came to tour the plant.[8]

While the Christians from the urban areas of Syria were settling down to factory life in the Blackstone Valley, Maronite Catholics were coming from the rural Wadi Qadisa, the "Holy Valley" of northern Lebanon, described by an American traveler in 1920 as a "wonderful gorge," thousands of feet deep and so narrow that the sun only penetrates it completely at mid-day.[9] George Roukous, who came to Providence between 1889 and 1894, was possibly the first Maronite to come to Rhode Island. He worked as a door-to-door dry goods salesman, and as he saved he was able to stake newer arrivals in the peddling business. Eventually he became a wholesale supplier of peddlers' goods.

Maronites came to Providence from the villages of Becharre, Ehden, Baan, Blouza, Hadchit, Edde, Seer Dennieh, and especially Kfarsghab. In 1901, Michael and Yasmin Hanna, Elias and Christina Badway, John Abood, Michael and Rafunia Jbeir, and Michael and Doura Ghul arrived in Providence.[10] They had chosen Rhode Island as their destination on the advice of a money changer and interpreter in Lebanon who said one could make a living there selling door-to-door. From Tripoli came the Tanury family and Michael Akkaoui. Thomas L. Wobby came in 1906 from Blouza. In 1905, Assad Michael arrived from Kfarsghab, followed five years later by his brother Peter. Like others who came before them, the brothers began as peddlers, but the Michaels eventually opened a successful department store.[11]

Joseph and Marun Courey Badway came to Providence with their children from Kfarsghab in 1913. In 1921, when they decided to return to Lebanon, their son Mansour took an automobile along with them. It was the first automobile ever to be seen in the village. Mansour and his wife Mary came back to Providence, and Mansour resumed selling door-to-door as he had before. His son Joseph became a physician.[12]

Boulous Abood came alone from Kfarsghab in 1907. Four years later he returned to the village, married, fathered a son, Joseph, and returned to Providence. Fourteen years later he was able to send for his son, and the two of them went into the carpet business together. Boulous' wife, Nazera, did not join them until 1947, only seven years before Boulous died.[13]

By the beginning of World War I, the Blackstone Valley Syrians and the Maronites of Providence were well established. When the second wave of Syrians arrived in Rhode Island after the war, they picked up the trades of their relatives who had preceded them. Joseph Soloman, father of Abraham Soloman, the former General

Treasurer of the State and the 1984 Democratic candidate for governor, came to Providence in 1918. He sold coal out of a back pack and became successful selling clothes door-to-door on credit. Like the Beirut merchant of today, he became fluent in the language of his customers, the Italian immigrants who were his neighbors on "The Hill."

When the flow of immigrants to Rhode Island ended with the National Origins Act, there were about 460 Maronites, 150 Old Syrian Orthodox, and from 1,400 to 1,800 others, divided between the Melkites and Antiochian Orthodox.[14] For the most part, their coming to Rhode Island had been a movement of inter-related families and confessional alliances—so much so that the Syrian Churches were made up of extended families and people whose predecessors came from the same villages. Today one will still hear a Syrian-American refer to the others in the church as "our people," and in every sense they are.

## *The Syrian Communities, 1920 - 1950*

The largest concentration of Syrians in Rhode Island was in the city of Central Falls. Up and down Washington Street in the city beat the heart of Syrian-American life from the 1920s to the 1950s. Within a few short blocks were the Syrian-American Club, the Aleppian Aid Society, and St. Ephraim's Church. Two and three story clapboard tenement houses were home to the Syrians.

"Life was lonely at first," says Joseph Anter, who moved to Central Falls in 1919, "but there were other people from Aleppo to play cards with." The family—10 of them had come together—lived in a tenement with two families to a floor sharing one toilet. "Back in Aleppo we all lived together in one house with a big courtyard in the middle . . . . but in Central Falls, we had running water inside the house!"

The Syrians of Central Falls specialized in silk weaving. Textile factories with names like Coats, Sayles, and Wayposet were Central Falls' "staff of life." Nearby was green and shady Jenks Park, a favorite haunt of Syrian men, in particular, who used to gather under a massive umbrella for an afternoon of cards.[15]

The Syrians began moving into the Washington Street area in 1915, and by the 1920s the names of the families along the street would be familiar to the neighborhood 60 years later—names like Gabriel Peters, Ellis and James Hanna, Farris Sharki, Elias Corey, Thomas Anter, Amina Homsy, Habib Aisis, Abraham Shabo, Gabriel Danho, John Abdelahad, George Debo, Paul Alkas, and Rose Risho. Clustered along the street were names of businesses like Yooaki Mshati Shoes, Hamod's Central Quick Lunch, Jarjoura Assard-Barber, Banna Shackrey Lunch, George Massin Shoe Repair, Toofik Hamond Dry Goods, Joseph Tajra Variety, and Hafeefa Kaspar's Restaurant. Washington Street boasted no less than six grocers: George Donoto, Peter Tohan, the Sayegh brothers, George Joseph, Amen Kelsey, and Touffas Hammond with his "Fruit and Pool Room."

"We had no money, but we had the best of everything," recalls Alicia Peters, whose mother came from Aleppo in 1920. Alicia remembers that all of Central Falls was divided into ethnic enclaves. "At our end of the street we were all Syrians." The Irish were mostly on Dexter Street and the French on Lonsdale Avenue, while the Poles lived on High Street. "All the Syrians would gather on Washington Street," recalls Alicia. "The men were at the Club playing cards. We had bonfires on the Fourth of July, *mahrajan, hafleh,* and weddings. Everything was such fun . . . and we learned honesty and to be compassionate for others."

It's fortunate that the newly-arrived Americans from such diverse backgrounds got along so well, because according to a 1934 report in the *Providence Journal,* Central Falls was the most densely populated municipal entity in the United States. In the town's one square mile, 26,000 people made their homes. Half of these were French, 4,000 were Poles, 1,000 were Syrians, and 600-700 were Portuguese.[16]

In 1934, a Providence lady went to Washington Street in search of "Arabians," having just returned from a trip to Iraq, and gives us this picture of what she found:

"Not far from the city limits is a street where people born on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates River assemble. Some will be seen smoking their elaborate water pipes as they sit on long Arabian benches. And if you will look in a little coffee shop you will find the same fare that you would be served in Mosul. There is a bright samover, and you will be served Arabian coffee in tiny cups. Hot tea in glasses and flat bread may be had . . . . and you may even rent a water pipe to smoke while here . . .the true politeness born in these people, the natural graciousness and hospitality that all their people possess made an atmosphere greater than its surroundings."[18]

About a mile away from Washington Street in Central Falls is the the Pleasant View Section of Pawtucket.[19] Pleasant View was, and still is, a working class tenement district. During the 1920s and 1930s an estimated 160 Syrian families lived in this multi-ethnic neighborhood. Many of the first generation adults worked in nearby textile mills where a large number were employed as weavers. Several of them were also shopkeepers. Most of the immigrants had come from Damascus, but there were also some families from Aleppo, Homs, Mardin and Douma. In terms of religious affiliation the Syrians of Pleasant View were largely Antiochian Orthodox or Melkite Catholic; there were also a few Old Syrian Orthodox families.

The Maronites of Federal Hill came to Rhode Island already imbued with the entrepreneurial spirit. The families who came to Providence in 1901 had chosen the state specifically because they heard that one could make a living selling door-to-door in Rhode Island. A living was all it was, for in the early years life was a struggle. The Maronites settled in one square block bordered by Cedar, Acorn, West Exchange Street and Arthur Avenue. From a 1973 article in the Italian newspaper, *The Echo,* we have a window on the Maronite experience as seen through the eyes of an Italian neighbor on the "Hill." The Italians called them "Ra-bi-ans," the author says, "meaning Arabians, just like they called the Italians Wops or the Irish Harps." But in the 1930s, he says from his own experience, they made it known that they are not Arabians or Syrians, but wanted to be known as "Lebanese-Americans."[20] He goes on to describe the Maronites in this way:

"The first Lebanese people that lived in the section struggled, suffered and worked hard to bring their children up, the children who became the second and third generation Lebanese on the Hill. In the olden days, there were just a few that worked in a factory. There wasn't a Lebanese store or business place around this section for a long time after they immigrated. Most of their means of support was the womenfolk . . . . In the early 1900s, as I recall it, the women would start early in the morning with a load on their shoulders, and they would trot from house to house. Some of them would even trot to Silver Lake and Eagle Park on foot. We would call them the walking Dry Goods Store. Some of the items they would sell were sheets, pillow cases, spreads, blankets, and curtains, and a large variety of dry goods.

"They would have to trust to make the sale, and the payments were as small as 25 cents a week. Just think of it, they would have to trot back every week to collect a miserable 25 cents to support the family.

"One that I recall very well was Lulu Kabbas Beetar. We called her little Rosie. She was the mother of the late Antoine Beetar that you might recall. Every single morning Lulu would go to the produce market on Canal Street at Market Square with her 5 and 10 cent store, which was the basket full of items from collar buttons to shoe laces. She was the liveliest and most lovable person you would ever want to meet. It's little Lulu that I just spoke about and may she always rest in peace.

"The Lebanese of old were very shy. They were innocent and honest and never once can I recall that they mingled in with the stone fights that the Italians would have with the Irish of Smith Hall. They would never mix into a brawl that the street corner kids would have, although they might have a battle or two, but it was among themselves. I recall how the oldtimers would lounge around the sidewalks and smoke the bottle of water that was called "Arkeely." We kids would call it the pipe of peace."[21]

## The Churches as Agents of Cultural Preservation

In November of 1908 Father Hannah Khourie celebrated the first Old Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) mass in Rhode Island. The priest had been ordained in Jerusalem only the year before especially for the Old Syrians of North America. His mission was to keep "his people" faithfully attached to the doctrines of their church and to the faith of their fathers. Father Khourie had another mission as well: to guide his people toward becoming American citizens. "If you intend to stay in America, become citizens," he urged his congregation, "and support the Constitution always." He advised them that much was owed to the American people for allowing them to share in the liberty of America. They should live the lives of good citizens, and keep up the good name of their people in this country. The priest concluded his comments by offering a special prayer for President William Taft.[22]

The secular words of the priest spoken in the context of a mass might sound out of place to the ears of the second generation, but to the new arrivals his words couldn't have been more appropriate. In Ottoman Syria, the priest was the community leader. In their immediate lives the church was their government. The priests and bishops were the intermediaries between themselves and the outside. To be concerned with secular matters was integral to the role of the church. Now they were in America and the church was relinquishing that part of its role. "Become Americans," was the message, "but do not lose touch with the faith, the people and traditions from which you came."

The path of the new Americans was in fact in these two directions, directions which were in some ways contradictory. "Americans" were Protestants or Roman Catholics. The Syrian churches, including the Maronite and Melkite which were in affiliation with Rome, followed liturgies and rituals which appeared strange to other Americans, be they "Yankees" or recent immigrants. The "Syrians" spoke Arabic—a language utterly foreign and written in a script unintelligible to Americans. Their way of life was founded on intimate and constant family contact, with time devoted daily to religion, but in America they would be workers wedded to a time-clock. For the Syrians, the process of "becoming Americans" meant moving very far away from the religion and traditions they were entrusted to preserve.

The first priority in preserving their heritage was founding a church. The Maronites and Melkites received financial support from the Catholic Diocese of Rhode Island. By 1908 the Melkites had already found a permanent priest, the Reverend Ananias Boury, and were having regular services in the basement of a Polish church. In 1909 the Melkites purchased a piece of land on Broad Street in Central Falls and the Catholic Diocese provided money to build St. Basil's church, which was completed in 1911.[23] In that year the parish had about 400 members, and grew to over 1,000 by 1931. Some of St. Basil's parishoners came from Woonsocket to attend mass. The 250 Melkites in Woonsocket, however, wished to have their own church, and in 1931 they founded St. Elias Church.[24]

Over the years St. Basil's Church has actively sought to preserve the Arab heritage of Central Falls' Melkites. In 1920, for example, Fr. Jock established the first Melkite parochial school in the United States. During the 13 years it operated, the object of St. Basil's School was to educate the American-born children of the immigrants in the Arabic language and to prepare them to be responsible citizens of the country in which their parents had chosen to settle. A total of 156 students were graduated from the school before it closed.[25] Today St. Basil's is the largest Syrian church in Rhode Island, having 350 families in its congregation. The church continues to run Arabic language and history classes for the youth of the parish.

The impetus for the Maronite families in Providence to build a church of their own was their inability to gain recognition as Catholics and receive the sacraments from the Catholic Church on Federal Hill. Initially the Catholics would not acknowledge the Maronites as Christians, thinking them to be Muslims. Once recognized as Christians, they were not accepted as fellow Roman Catholics. Michael and

St. Basil's School provided a forum for Arabic-language theater for the Syrian immigrant community. Here the students from St. Basil's form the cast of the comedy *Hat al-Kawi ya Sayyid*.

Yasmin Hanna, who arrived in Providence from Kfarsghab in 1901, secured with some difficulty a priest to marry them. This priest would not marry them in the church, however. This event confirmed to the Maronites that they must have a church of their own, and the Hannas, Elias and Christina Badway and Assad Michael, among others, began to work toward this end.[26]

Eventually the Catholic Diocese became more accepting of the Maronites and responded to their needs. Bishop Harkins helped them obtain a loan in 1911 to purchase a tenement house on America Street.[27] This became St. George's Maronite Church. Over the years the support of the Catholic diocese proved invaluable. The Diocese provided nuns to teach St. George's Sunday School, and in 1922 St. George's priest, Father Gideon, received permission from the bishop of Providence to solicit contributions from other Catholic parishes in the neighborhood to pay off a church debt.[28] In so doing, Father Gideon established a precedent which was to be profitably pursued whenever the church was in need throughout his 25 years at St. George's. "I can remember my mother," says Elias Badway, "standing at the steps of the other churches on Sunday mornings with our priest and other women, their aprons raised to accept donations." In the early 1920s, the parish had 460 members, 200 of whom were children. The church building was renovated and enlarged over the years, but remained on America Street until 1977, when the parish purchased an Episcopal church building in Pawtucket. Today, there are about 450 Maronite families in Rhode Island, and 200 are active members of St. George's Maronite Church.

The Orthodox Syrian churches did not receive financial help from American churches and had to wait many years before they could establish church buildings of their own. The Syrian Antiochian Orthodox community in Pawtucket joined together as early as 1910 to form "St. Mary's Syrian Orthodox Charitable Society." However, this religious association had neither a permanent priest nor a building of its own in which to worship. The Charitable Society and its Women's Auxillary, formed in 1913, met at various homes where occasional services were celebrated by visiting priests. In 1917 the community purchased property for a church on High Street in Pawtucket. A basement was completed and services were held there until 1928 when the church was finished. According to the earliest surviving records of the church, James, the infant son of Richard Hanna and Edna Hashim, was, in 1918, the first child to be baptised in the basement church.

During the late 1920s and 1930s the parishioners of St. Mary's put on several plays.[29] The public performances were held in the junior high school auditorium. Many of the plays were written by Rev. Slamon Fernainy, the pastor of St. John of Damascus Antiochian Orthodox Church in Boston. The plays, which were set in the Middle East, were written in Arabic and usually incorporated passages of poetry. For second-generation "stars" who could speak but not read Arabic, their parts were written phonetically in English. The Rev. George Nahas of St. Mary's and Jameela Takmonsli directed the plays. On several occasions the St. Mary's cast was invited to perform at St. John of Damascus Church in Boston.

The Old Syrian Orthodox community formed an "Assyrian Charitable Society" to provide for the religious education of their children as early as 1905,[30] but like the Antiochian Orthodox, they waited many years before they had a church. In 1913 they formed St. Ephraim's Society, with the purpose of working toward the building of a church. It took 10 years to raise the $12,000 necessary to buy the land on Washington Street in Central Falls and to complete the church, and this was accomplished only with the assistance of their

PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT LAFFEY

As early as 1910 the Syrian Antiochian Orthodox community in Pawtucket formed the St. Mary's Syrian Orthodox Charitable Society pictured here.

PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT LAFFEY

The ladies of St. Mary's Orthodox Church established their Charitable Society Women's Auxilliary in 1917.

PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT LAFFEY

Alya al-Amir (left) and Wadi'a Dahoud pose in this 1920s photo from a play sponsored by St. Mary's Syrian Orthodox Church.

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sister parish in New Jersey. When the Syrian Apostolic Church of St. Ephraim was constructed in 1926, it was the second Old Syrian Orthodox church in America.[31] There were in all—men, women, and children—150 people in the parish.

Unfortunately the parish could not afford to support a priest. In 1932 their "borrowed" priest left for Worcester and the church was used only for special occasions. Weddings and baptisms were planned for the same time so that the expense of bringing the priest could be shared by more than one family. The church building burned in 1941 and the parish remained inactive for the next eight years.

Over all those years St. Ephraim's community did not disperse, nor even temporarily join with one of the two other Arabic-speaking churches in their neighborhood. This is a testament to the strength of identity with their religion. "It was unthinkable," says Weeda Gabriel, who was married in St. Ephraims's church in 1931. "You went only to your own church."

During those bleak years the Episcopal Diocese lent support to St. Ephraim's. The children attended an Episcopal Sunday school, and there was help in planning the new church which was completed in 1949.[32] The Reverend Abdelahad Doumato was ordained in Homs, Syria, especially for St. Ephraim's parish. When he arrived in 1952, the Old Syrian Orthodox community had a priest of their own for the first time after more than 60 years in America.

Just as the founding of a church was uppermost in the concerns of the early Middle Eastern Christians in Rhode Island, so was their interest in the welfare of their families back home. The first societies established reflected that interest. These societies were made up of people from the same town of origin, or of people who belonged to the same church. The first documented society, the Assyrian Charitable Society, dates back to 1905.[33] The "Syrian Relief Committee" was a Maronite organization that sent clothing to "Syria and Mt. Lebanon" during World War I.[34] In 1919, a "United Assyrian Christian Association" in Central Falls sent a delegation to New York to petition President Wilson to convince the Paris Peace Conference that northern Mesopotamia should be placed under American trusteeship.[35] "The Aleppian Aid Society," still on Washington Street in Central Falls, was founded in 1916 by people from Aleppo and Damascus as a united way of sending money to their families.[36] The "Syrian-American Association" and the "Aleppo Young Men's Club" brought people from the same villages together for social occasions. The "Providence Council of the Becchare Welfare Association of America" sent aid to families in Lebanon,[37] and the "Lebanon

Fraternal Society of Providence" was a social club for Maronites.[38] Between 1930 and 1940 the focus of these societies would turn from the old world to the land that was now their only home and would embrace other Americans of ethnic Syrian descent, whatever their religion.

The churches have continued to be the focus of Arabic ethnicity in Rhode Island. Today, with combined active membership of over 800 families, the churches are thriving. After four generations in America, the churches have emerged as a fulcrum of stability in a world in which changing addresses pull apart families and separate people from their ethnic roots. The generations meet in the churches. Families whose children have scattered reunite in the church at holiday time. These same traditions learned at their parents' side are traditions which can be passed on to their own children. People who may have turned away from religion come back to the churches to re-enact the rituals of life's passages in the ancient traditions of their forebears. Through the church societies the pleasure of Arabic music, dance and foods are shared in the company of others who trace their heritage to the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East. However assimilated Arab-Americans ultimately become, so long as people who love their heritage remain in the parishes of the Syrian Churches, the future of Arab ethnicity in Rhode Island is secure.

## *From "Syrian" Immigrants to Arab-Americans*

"Bicycles and Incubators Fade before Gold and Oil as Yankee Invades Arabia" read a Providence newspaper headline in 1918. [39] Next to the headline was a photograph of a balding, dark-haired man of middle age. It was David Saaty. Now he was exporting American goods to Iraq from his Westminister Street business establishment, dealing in minerals, and being praised as a "Yankee" by an American newspaper for his entrepreneurship.

By 1918 his brother had received a patent from Washington, D.C. for his invention of a single-movement pocket watch, his Rhode Island-born niece was a New York designer, one son a commercial illustrator and another son an engineer. A cousin he had brought over in 1905 was working at Brown and Sharpe and another cousin, Alice Miller, was to become the first woman to graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design. Yet another cousin, Hadi Hasso, practiced optometry in Rhode Island.

The speed with which Arabic-speaking people attained a viable economic place and acceptance into mainstream America consumed barely a generation. Part of the reason for this rapid assimilation lay in the small size of the community. While there were enough people to cushion the adjustment to American life and to sustain tradition, the community was not large enough to fully respond to their widening aspirations. Because there were few Arabs, they did not have to deal particularly with negative stereotypes formed by the larger society. On the other hand, the "Syrians" were more foreign by culture, language and tradition than the Europeans. The quota system had separated them from families in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, insuring that their community would remain small and, by implication, setting them apart as people who are less desirable.

"When I was growing up in Central Falls in the 1930s and 1940s," says one Arab-American, "all the boys wanted to marry an American girl. But what did it mean to be 'an American?' If she was Irish, she was American, if she was Polish, she was American. But what about us? Why weren't we Americans?"

Not everyone shared this feeling, but for those who did, the motivation from within to get away from feeling different, to accept and be accepted by American society bolstered the drive toward assimilation.

The change in customs and traditions, and the adoption of more "American" values was already in evidence in the 1920s. So noted the *Providence Journal* in 1929:

"The Syrians' (and the Assyrians') world revolved around three institutions, the home, the church and the coffee house. The ties of family life are strong. The claims of kinship are highly respected. A Syrian will make any sacrifice for a relative. Disobedience to a parent is almost as unknown as unfaithfulness to a spouse in Syrian families. In the home a man is king. Housework and the rearing of the children fall entirely on the wife, and in Syria or Mesopotamia it is a disgrace for the man to bestir himself about such tasks. This tradition is rapidly crumbling here, however." [40]

Women could hardly be expected to continue to perform all the labor of the household when they were working in factories all day or in the family grocery. They were also out on the streets selling door-to-door along with the men: "Unfailingly good-natured, honest to the last penny of their tiny transactions, they trudge from office to office or from factory to factory with their baskets on their arms," wrote the same reporter in 1929. [41] Many traditions were crumbling. Marriage customs began to change almost upon arrival in America. In the old country marriages were family arrangements. Often the bride and groom did not know each other until the exchange of their marriage vows. "When I was about fifteen years old," says a woman who came to Rhode Island from Beirut, "we lived in Homs, in Syria. One day a man from our church in Damascus arrived at our house with his son. We knew that the son was to marry either me or my sister Salima, but we didn't know which one of us it was to be. That hadn't been decided yet."

Right from the beginning in America, young people were meeting and choosing each other through school, church, work or the neighborhood. Young couples not only knew each other before marriage, they were even choosing marriage partners from a church other than their own. Intermarriage, that is, marriage uniting a person from the Arabic-speaking community with someone from a different ethnic background, was rare in the 1920s and 1930s, according to early church records, and was still uncommon right through to World War II. By 1950, however, most marriages performed in the Syrian churches united an Arab American with someone of a different ethnic background.

Celebrations of religious holidays were changing too. The "Fast of Nineveh" used to be observed by three days of fasting in commemoration of Jonah's visit to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. By the late 1920s the observance was kept only by the older people because the factory week had made the fast too rigorous for those who were working. St. Barbara's Day is a religious holiday warmly remembered as a day to serve a sweet dish called *slee'a,* which is made of wheat, raisins, walnuts, cinnamon and sugar, and decorated on top with blanched almonds and colored candies. In the evening relatives would come over for a *sahra*, an evening party of visiting and dancing the dabkeh. A New Year's Day tradition no longer observed is offering holiday visitors a dish of *kibbeh lebaniyeh,* fried ovals of ground lamb and cracked wheat stuffed with onions and pine nuts and cooked in yogurt spiced with garlic and mint. On this day families and friends would greet each other with a wish for a "white year," meaning a year of happiness.

One tradition which has not disappeared over the years is the Arab respect for family life. "No nation in all the world has more intense feeling of family, and the clan loyalty extends to sixth, seventh, and eighth cousins," wrote a visitor to Lebanon in 1922.[42] Today if one were to ask Americans of Arab descent what are the traditions of his ethnic heritage that he holds to be of value, included is certain to be respect for parents, respect for family life, and loyalty to the family unit.

By looking at the societies that were formed after 1930, one can see that assimilation brought political awareness. Rhode Island politicians courted the Arab-Americans as a voting constituency. The passage of time also began to dilute the differences among the people of the four Syrian churches and to magnify the things they held in common. Once they began to feel secure in themselves as Americans, the younger generation could appreciate the benefits of embracing the larger Arabic-speaking ethnic community.

In 1932, a "Syrian-American Federation of New England" was set up to include Arabic-speaking people from all over the area. When the Syrian-American Club of Central Falls hosted a Federation convention at the Biltmore Plaza in Providence in 1934, 1,000 people attended. Regional luminaries such as the Governor of the State of Rhode Island, the mayors of Central Falls and Providence, a United States Congressman and the Massachusetts State Treasurer were there to court the Arab ethnic vote. The Governor made a speech in which he praised the ancient roots of Syrian civilization and described the Syrians as "high-type citizens." He then addressed a subject very close to the Syrians, saying that he was not in favor of "racially-based" immigration quotas.[43]

In the 1950s the "Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization for the New England Region" attracted hundreds to their social activities. The Aleppian Aid Society, no longer concerned with sending money back to Syria, sponsored *haflas* and programs of Arabic films and speakers. The "Maronite Men of New England" sponsored a *mahrajan* that each year brought together as many as 5,000 people. In 1956, "The Rhode Island Order of the Middle East," "a civic, charitable, cultural organization devoted to the interests of all peoples of Arabic background,"[44] was successful in arousing the support of United States Senators Green and Pastore to rescue a blind Syrian woman from certain deportation.

In 1947 Charles Slamon began producing a radio program, "Songs of Syria."[45] It was the second Arabic language program in the U.S. "Songs of Syria" was broadcast live on Sunday mornings. Initially it was a half-hour show, but in the 1950s it was expanded to a full hour. In addition to playing music, Slamon provided announcements of social events in the Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket communities. In 1968 the name of the show was changed to "Music of the Near East." Slamon continued to produce the program live until December, 1974, then he began to tape it. In 1982, after 35 years of consecutive production, Slamon retired, turning over the show to Thomas Sabbagh who has renamed the program "Music of the Middle East."

During the past 20 years there has been a resurgence of ethnic pride among Rhode Island's Syrian community. Perhaps the most significant and enduring of the new organizations has been the Arab Educational Foundation. Initiated by Fredrick Nashawaty and John Nazarian in 1967, the Foundation brings together the Arabic-speaking churches of the Blackstone Valley to provide scholarships for persons of Arab descent. Under the auspices of the Foundation, the Arab-American community experienced a cultural renaissance. Three of the churches and the Foundation formed the Arabic Interfaith and Educational Council of the Blackstone Valley. Between 1968 and 1973 the Council planned annual mahrajans which brought together an enthusiastic crowd of 2,500 people for a day of Arabic food, music and dance, and an interfaith service held jointly by the priests of all three parishes.

In October 1973, as the fourth Arab-Israeli war was in progress, several concerned individuals met at St. Mary's Church in Pawtucket and formed the Arab-American Friends for Justice in the Middle East Committee of Rhode Island (AAFME). Robert Laffey, one of the co-founders of AAFME and its secretary, recalls the purposes and activities of the organization:

"We had three objectives. On the humanitarian level, our goal was to provide aid for the Arab civilian victims of the war. On the political level, we wanted to be sure an Arab viewpoint about the Middle East conflict received public expression. The Arab call for a just peace was simple: self-determination for the Palestinians and the return of Arab land which Israel occupied in 1967. Yet the press always ignored the Arab position. On the cultural level, we wanted to better inform the American public of the cultural heritage of the Arab world. We also hoped to bring our own community closer together, to help them feel pride in being Arab-American.

"To further our aims, we gave public lectures, took out ads in the newspapers, wrote letters to the editors, and appeared on radio talk shows and television news programs. We put on dinners to raise money and held clothing drives. Father [Athanasius] Saliba, who was then the pastor of St. Mary's and now Bishop of Damascus, played a crucial role in the work of AAFME. He was never timid about speaking up publicly about the issues and we all owe a debt to him. Our officers included Joseph Jabbour as president, Gabriel Altongy, vice-president, and Thomas Lazeih, treasurer.

"In December 1977, AAFME merged with the Arab-American Association of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission to form the Rhode Island Association of Arab-Americans. In December, 1981, politically active Arab-Americans, feeling that a national organization would provide a more effective means of expressing their concerns, organized the Rhode Island Chapter of ADC."[46]

Today there are some 6,000 to 7,000 Arab-Americans living in Rhode Island. The 1965 immigration act opened the path to America for people from the Middle East once again. Since that time more than a thousand Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Jordanians and Arab Christians from eastern Turkey have come to Rhode Island. Half of St. Ephraim's parish today are newcomers to America. Coptic Christians from Egypt who are recent arrivals in Rhode Island have established the first Coptic church in the state, St. Mary and St. Mena. There are perhaps 100 Egyptian Muslim families in Rhode Island as well.

Many of the new Arab immigrants to the state came as students to obtain professional degrees, married in America and stayed. Others came like their turn-of-the-century counterparts—because of political turmoil, to avoid conscription, to join relatives, or to improve their lives. The experiences they have had in becoming Americans is not the same, however. For many of them, education and intermarriage brought about almost immediate assimilation into American society.

The tight community bonding that characterized the earlier immigrants no longer serves a purpose, for American society is not the same in 1985 as it was before World War II. The mainstream American society to which the ethnic communities once aspired as outsiders is now much more tolerant of ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the new immigrants that have come to America are far better educated than the tradesmen and mountain folk of the earlier immigration and can achieve social and economic mobility impossible to their predecessors. They are better educated, not because they derive from a different social class, but because social advantages and education over the course of the century have been made available to every level of society in their native countries. In addition, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which replaced the quota system, gives preference to individuals with professional qualifications as eligibile to immigrate to America.

For some, being better educated has been a mixed blessing. Individuals qualified to work as bank employees, teachers, office managers, clerks, salespersons, and bureaucrats in their native lands are often unable to translate their experience and education into marketable skills in America.

Because they have high personal expectations for themselves, having to work as laborers has been a difficult adjustment. The children of these recent immigrants, however, have the advantage of being raised in homes that value education and are generally college-bound.

Arabic-speaking people who came to Rhode Island to obtain professional degrees, along with Arab-Americans, have made substantial contributions to the state and to society. Today they are found everywhere across the economic and social spectrum, in every profession, and in every business. They are judges, laborers, industrialists, pharmacists, lawyers, physicians, politicians, professors, teachers, shopkeepers, dentists and engineers. In the greater Providence area there are at least 30 practicing physicians of Arabic-speaking heritage. Dr. Edward Yazbak, who came from Lebanon in 1957 to further his medical studies in pediatrics, has held directorships associated with Brown University, Chafin and Woonsocket Hospitals. Mr. Makram Megalli, originally from Egypt, is Director of Public Works in Woonsocket. Yusef Musalli, who came to Rhode Island for his Ph.D. in 1966, chairs a number of committees for the American Society of Civil Engineers and has published three books in his engineering speciality. He also has set up a program of Arabic cultural events at St. Basil's church.

Mohamed Hussein, who came to Providence in 1964 to earn a degree in civil engineering, is involved as an engineer with the capital center project and is a director of the International Institute in Providence. Paul Jabbour has been elected to the State House of Representatives. Jay Ghazal, who came with his family to Rhode Island from Lebanon in 1973, was named State Boy of the Year in 1980 for his achievements in sports, in good citizenship and in his studies. Thomas A. Tanury has led the growth of his family's plating business to a multi-million dollar company employing 110 people. Daniel Issa was elected to the Central Falls School Board at age 21 and became the youngest school board chairman in the United States at the time.

Joseph John, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and of the Harvard Business School, was selected as one of the Outstanding Young Men of America by the Jaycees in 1971 and has founded a chain of fast seafood restaurants in California. Anthony Solomon was General Treasurer of the State for nine years and won the Democratic nomination for governor in 1984. John Nazarian, the vice-president for administration at Rhode Island College, is currently the acting president of the college, as well as being an accomplished 'oud player and vocalist. Norman Chopy was Chief Engineer with the State Department of Transportation and is now a director of special projects for the department.

Dr. Edward Joseph is an oral surgeon, and his brother, Dr. John Joseph, a pediatrician on the staff of Massachusetts General Hospital, has taught at Harvard Medical School. A third brother, Halim Joseph, is a pharmacist. All three are children of Nasif Joseph, a Federal Hill dry goods salesman.

When all the praise for success in one's chosen profession or economic endeavors is through, what really endures is the decency of the person, the stability he or she brings to the family and his or her ability to raise children prepared to assume a responsible place in society. People within the Arabic-speaking community are proud to point out that crime and delinquency are almost unknown among their people, and that to this day, families are very stable with few divorces. Perhaps the finest tribute to the Arabic-speaking communities in Rhode Island is expressed by a Cumberland woman born in Central Falls of Syrian parents before World War I. When asked who in the Arabic ethnic community has contributed to the betterment of Rhode Island and the nation, she replied, "My four children who, in their own little way, I believe, are an asset to this nation." ◆

## Notes

1. "Young Watchmaker Led Them Here," *Evening Bulletin*, April 17, 1929, p.9

2. United States Department of Labor. *Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration*. Washington, 1929. Table 86, "Immigrant Aliens Admitted, 1899-1929."

3. "Turkish Names Present Puzzle in Draft," *Providence Journal*, April 16, 1918, p.5

4. Survey of Arabic-Speaking Communities in Rhode Island, conducted by author, 1984.

5. Rhode Island Bureau of Industrial Statistics. *Some Nationality and Race Factors in Rhode Island*. Part 5 of the Annual Report for 1909. Providence, 1910, p.238

6. "Early Settlers Slept and Ate in Mills on First Arrival Here in 1902," *Evening Bulletin*, April 24, 1929, p.8

7. Ibid.

8. Survey, op cit.

9. E.S. Stevens, *Cedars, Saints and Sinners in Syria.* London: circa 1922. Contains a chapter, "The Holy Valley," which describes the region from which most Rhode Island Lebanese came.

10. Survey, op cit.

11. "Founder of St. George's," *Providence Journal,* April 3, 1972, p.22

12. "Lebanese People in Federal Hill," *The Echo,* Nov. 8, 1973

13. Ibid.

14. " St. George's Catholic Church, Maronite Rite," Nov. 26, 1977. (A church published pamphlet)

15. "Central Falls and Syrians," *Providence Journal,* April 15, 1934, p.5

16. Review of Central Falls and Pawtucket City Directories, 1900-1930.

17. "Central Falls and Syrians," *Providence Journal,* April 15, 1934.

18. "She Sought Arabia Near Providence," *Providence Sunday Journal,* September 2, 1934.

19. Information on Pawtucket has been provided by Dr. Robert Laffey, a grandson of immigrants from Lebanon and Syria who settled in Pleasant View. Dr. Laffey, who is now a historian, grew up in Pleasant View. His assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

20. "The Lebanese People of Federal Hill," *The Echo,* Nov. 8, 1973.

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22. "First Assyrian Mass Held," *Providence Journal,* November 9, 1908, p. 2

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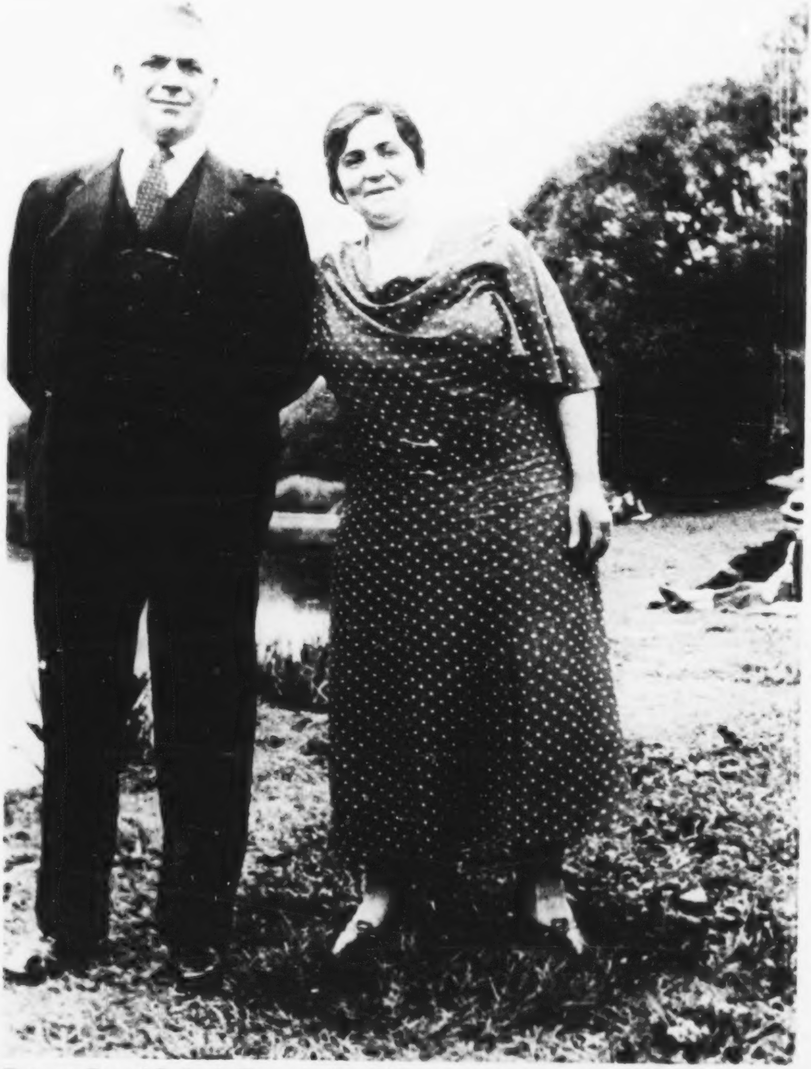

Thomas F. and Delia A. Tinory in the 1930s.

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# Going Home

## *As told to Eugene P. Tinory*

My father made the important decision in 1903 to leave his native land and the little village of Ameeh to join the growing migration of many of his countrymen to the land of opportunity in the western hemisphere. It was early spring when father left us. I would not see him again for eight years when we would finally be reunited in Boston, Massachusetts. He left his family behind to join two nephews there hoping to bring us all to America when he got settled into a home and a job. It took my father five years to save enough money for us to begin preparations for our trip to America.

The preparations included a physical examination to determine whether or not we were fit to enter America. From the time I was a child I had always had trouble with my eyes. Mother feared this would preclude my passing the physical, and she purposely arranged to have me examined last, after my brothers. She hoped that the medical authorities would feel sorry for a little girl and pass her, even though there might be some sort of impairment which could otherwise delay or prevent my emigration.

The day of emigration turned out to be the agony and disappointment I had imagined. My mother and brothers passed the physicals without any complications, but I was rejected. My eye trouble was traced to trachoma and the doctors realized that I could never get into America with this common eye disease. Fear and loneliness crept into every inch of me. Although my loved ones did not

*This chapter is an edited excerpt from the memoirs of Delia A. Tinory. These memoirs have been published in a book entitled* Tempest Tossed to Thee*, in the fall of 1985. The book can be obtained by writing* Tempest Tossed to Thee, 850 High Street, Westwood, Mass. 02090.

*Proceeds from the sale of this book will benefit the Delia A. Tinory Lebanese War Orphan Fund.—Ed.*

leave Lebanon for weeks after the exam, it was as if I had already been separated from them forever.

My grandmother comforted me and tried to convince me that I would be happy with her in Lebanon and perhaps I could go to America later, but her consoling words were of no avail. I tried begging my mother not to go, but she felt it was very necessary for her to rejoin my father after years of separation.

I remember the day in 1908 when my mother and my brothers left. They had packed their meager belongings on a donkey cart tied up outside of grandmother's home. My cousin Sadie comforted me as we fed the donkey and tried to convince ourselves that the separation would be only temporary. Grandmother and I huddled together in the doorway, tears rolling down our cheeks as the wagon disappeared over the horizon.

After my mother left, I lost all desire to go anywhere or see anyone. I spent the lonely days conducting my chores around the house and in the fields, caring for the goats, cows and other animals and awaiting word from my parents that I should try to unite with them. One day a letter arrived from America telling me that mother had landed in Charlestown, Massachusetts. In each letter a small amount of money was enclosed to help defray the cost of my room and board in my grandmother's home.

Father was gradually becoming a Bostonian. He had developed a wide circle of friends, among whom was Amin Handy, a recent immigrant from Syria who had married another immigrant after arriving in Boston. Mrs. Handy was a lovely woman who seemed the picture of health until a physical examination revealed she had tuberculosis. She was also pregnant and thought that the return to Lebanon and its warm, dry climate might help her. Father asked Mrs. Handy to bring his daughter Deeby Ann back when she returned to the United States. It had been a long time since he had seen me and he looked forward to our reunion.

Father had managed to save enough from his $6-a-week salary at the Simply Wire Factory to sponsor my travels. Out of this modest income he had to provide for his family and pay $2 a week rent for the attic room they lived in.

Mrs. Handy died of tuberculosis soon after returning to Lebanon. Her infant daughter was taken away by relatives. Back in Boston, Mr. Handy took very hard the death of his young wife and the mysterious disappearance of their baby.

As his friend, my father tried to console Mr. Handy. He reminded him that another daughter, his Deeby, was in Lebanon and needed assistance to get to Boston. Mr. Handy returned to his home village of Ein, Lebanon, and launched a full investigation into the disappearance of his daughter. The case was never resolved, and after days of fruitless searching, Mr. Handy gave up in dispair and began planning for his return trip to the United States. I was to meet him in Beirut in a few weeks and I needed to make the necessary preparations. The year was 1912.

My preparations were not complicated. I packed my few belongings in a single bag. My greatest anxiety was my medical problem. How I was to go there with the trachoma was still a great uncertainty.

PHOTO NATIONAL ARCHIVES

U.S. Immigration officers examine an immigrant at Ellis Island around the turn of the century for trachoma, a contagious form of conjunctivitis characterized by the formation of inflammatory granulations on the inner eyelid. Trachoma was a common eye ailment in the Middle East at that time.

On a sunny spring morning, I left my ancestral village, never quite believing this was to be the final farewell to my childhood memories. Mr. Handy was given money to purchase my ticket on a ship from Beirut to Boston. A neighbor had offered to give me a donkey ride into town to the railroad station. My grandmother packed me a lunch that seemed large enough to last me all the way to America. Granny was always very generous with me. My last memory of Ameeh was a sad farewell and the tears rushing down granny's face.

The scent of springtime was in the air. Along the way we passed goats and sheep. The sun shone brightly as we made our way along the dirt road toward Beirut. The golden buds had already begun to appear in the vineyards we passed.

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Springtime is the most beautiful time of the year for me, as it brings forth the promise of new life. It was in the spirit of this promise that I felt close to nature, to God and to the threshold of a bright future on that unforgettable spring morning.

Our cart drew up and parked just outside the railroad station in Zahleh, the largest town in the area in those days. When I was a small child growing up in Ameeh, I always looked up to Zahleh as that "big town" near us and felt that, when I was ready for marriage, I would marry a "big city" man from Zahleh and live happily ever after with him there. My hope to one day marry a Zahlewan was realized—not in Zahleh however, but in Boston.

The bitter loneliness which had enveloped me during those first few hours of our trip began to subside and was replaced with a feeling of anticipation. My first glimpse of Beirut was impressive. After having lived in a tiny town composed of a handful of one-story stone and clay homes, it was striking to see wide avenues lined with multi-storied buildings. The automobile had not yet made its debut in Beirut and the streets were crowded with wagons and animals of all types. It was amid this scene that we spent the days before our final departure.

On a brilliantly sunny day, our group finally wended its way down the main street toward the harbor where our ship was waiting. I was awed by the size of the ship and by my first real look at the sea. The scent of salt air was new to me, and the presence of many other boats and ships was inspiring. Ship whistles pierced the air and echoed off the buildings that stood sentry along the waterfront.

Breathless, I approached the big gray monster of a ship. It was the first time I had ever seen such a vessel except in pictures. The suspended gangplank swayed gently in the breeze as I hopped from it on to the deck. Mr. Handy had a little harder time negotiating the gangplank and I turned back to give him a hand. A reception crew from the ship's personnel did the best they could to welcome us aboard and relieve us of our baggage. As soon as we could, we made our way to the upper deck from which we could take in the full panorama. It seemed everyone had the same idea; the upper deck became jammed with weeping men and women waving to relatives below.

After thrashing my way through a forest of legs, luggage and coattails, I squeezed into a good position at the rail. Although I did not have to face the heartbreak of waving goodbye to loved ones on the pier, the electricity of the moment engaged me in weeping and waving at the crowd below.

We were at the point of no return. This is the time when an immigrant can either break under the anxiety and rush back into the security of the past, or overcome the magnetic pull of that familiar environment and move bravely into the unknown which promises a better life. It seemed to me like dying to be reborn into another life.

I then realized that the city of Beirut was moving! What a strange sensation. I was standing there, but the city was slowly moving by me. I had not realized that I actually said the city was moving until Mr. Handy tugged at me and assured me it was the ship that was moving and not the city. Now we all knew that there would be no turning back. We wept as Beirut became smaller and smaller, a pinpoint on the horizon.

I felt another tug on my sholder. Mr. Handy was calling all the crowd together to dance the dabkeh. We all joined in, and soon there was a chain dance circling the deck as people danced and sang and gave themselves the boost in morale they hungered for. Soon someone appeared with a darbakkeh, 'ouds came out of nowhere and the chain dance diverted into individual baladi and other dances. Some members of the crew joined in. The entire ship began to sway as if from the rhythm of the undulating oriental dance.

The familiar rhythms of the dabkeh soon gave way to the churning sensation of seasickness. Whenever the Mediterranean kicked its waves up we found ourselves back in the seasick delirium and most activities halted. One of the remedies of the day was to suck on lemons or oranges, or munch on dried Lebanese sweetcakes called "ka'ak."

I understood what poverty meant from living in Ameeh, but when I went to the upper deck for food, I came to the startling realization of how the wealthy lived as I walked along the decorated hallways separating the first class cabins. The aroma of carefully prepared meals attracted me to the fancy restaurant which was patronized by well-dressed first- and second-class passengers. Most people ignored me as I made my way to the food counter, but I occasionally caught a curious glance or raised eyebrow from someone passing me on the way to dinner. Most of the upper deck passengers were Europeans who were on their way home after having traveled in the eastern Mediterranean. I suppose they could tell from my dress that I was not a member of their preferred class. I realized for the first time that class distinction was not necessarily a land-based institution, but affected the law of the sea as well.

We stopped first at Alexandria to load and unload provisions; the passengers were not allowed to go ashore. Our next port of call was Messina, Sicily, two days later.

A strange dust cloud hovered over Messina as it appeared in the distance. We could sense some sort of trouble. As we watched from the deck people rushed about the city in a frenzy among what appeared to be ruins everywhere. Thousands of people had already gathered on the pier waving handkerchiefs and yelling. Was this a great welcome to the arriving ship or was there another reason for this strange gathering? As we moved closer to the pier and finally docked, I could see that most of the people below were wailing, crying and loaded down with personal belongings.

This was no homecoming celebration. We were witnessing Messina in the aftermath of a lethal earthquake and tidal wave which had practically destroyed the town, killing thousands. The calamity had occurred several days before our arrival, but the aftermath of disease and tragedy continued. The Messinans had heard about the arrival of our ship and had waited two days at the pier for the chance to get aboard for passage to Naples, our next stop.

The extent of the Messina disaster became known as a number of refugees scampered aboard our vessel and began to relate their stories of disaster and personal tragedy. Parts of the city were inundated, and overturned buildings were visable. As I looked down from the ship, I saw debris—parts of buildings, furniture and personal belongings—floating in the sea below.

Some 200 Messina citizens boarded our ship in desperation. I will never forget the mother who told us how her home collapsed, burying most of her family in the ruins. Only she and two daughters were left. She never learned what became of her husband, who was at work when the earthquake struck. She told us of the looters who took advantage of the situation to prey upon the victims of the calamity. She told us of how some of the looters cut the fingers off dead bodies to steal diamond and gold rings. "How could they," she sobbed as two members of the crew took her below to arrange for her passage. Most of the original passengers and the refugees remained on deck to watch Messina slide into the horizon as the ship headed out once again. Many hearts were broken that dusty day in Messina. The deck, once baptised in tears of joy and sadness at our departure from Beirut, was burdened by the indigent victims from Messina.

The next day we entered the picturesque harbor at Naples. Mt. Vesuvius rose in the background of what to me was the most beautiful city I had ever seen. All kinds of small craft came out to greet us, many of them vending fruits and flowers. Singing boatmen surrounded our ship in their small vessels and I wondered how our ship could get any closer without swamping them. For the first time since I left Beirut, I felt the urge to leave the ship and to see something different. My wish was granted when my bunkmate's father, Mr. Sbeeb, informed me that we would disembark and remain in Naples for several days until an American passenger ship was ready to take us aboard. I rushed down to my bunk area and hastily got things together. My heart pounded wildly at the prospect of seeing Naples.

Once at the hotel, I couldn't get over the elevator which carried people from floor to floor, and at first I was afraid to get on. Many other passengers felt the same way, and for the first day or so the stairways were crowded while the elevator remained virtually unused, despite the elevator operator's efforts to convince us it was safe.

What was originally scheduled as a few days in Naples turned out to be two weeks. Each morning we lowered our baskets from our hotel window to the street vendors to make morning purchases of milk, delicious fresh bread and other delicacies. The cry of the vendor echoed through the streets as the squeaking and rattling of opening windows punctuated his song. We put the coin into the basket and lowered it. The kids fought for the privilege of doing this, and on more than one occasion the rope slipped and the basket ended up bouncing off the pavement below.

One friend we made in Naples was a young school teacher from Damascus who had left the seminary in Rome to marry the girl he loved, an Italian girl of considerable wealth. As a Syrian living abroad, he yearned to meet tourists or anyone traveling from his homeland and offered to be our special guide during our stay in Naples.

We eagerly accepted the teacher's invitation to visit his beautiful villa overlooking Naples harbor. He took care to invite us one day when his socially-conscious wife was out cavorting with her socialite friends. Otherwise, he later explained, she might have frowned upon him having brought such ordinary travelers into their home. The home was elaborately decorated with an elegant art collection. We reciprocated his hospitality in our own small way by presenting several bags of lentils and other ingredients for Syrian food. He gratefully accepted.

One day, all travelers were called into a room at the hotel for final processing for departure. We had already recieved the necessary immunization shots and had completed the tedious forms. What lay ahead was what I dreaded the most. I turned cold when they announced it—the physical examination. My history of trachoma had prevented me from traveling to America with my parents in the first place. Now I must face this test again. The excitement of the past few weeks in Naples now turned to dread.

I took my place in the long line outside the room. My baggage was packed and sitting in the hotel lobby. There was a man at the desk and two other gentlemen standing on either side of him. I heard someone in front of me refer to him as *al-hakeem* (the physician). I shuddered. Then I learned a fear like I never anticipated when I left my grandmother in Ameeh and set out on my tempest-tossed journey.

It was finally my turn before the hakeem. The interpreter began, "What is your name, child?" I answered. "Where are you heading?" . . . "To America" I whispered. "The names of your parents and their home towns?" I became very nervous when I noticed the physician at my right stalking me with his stethoscope. "Abraham and Fred Corey, from Ameeh," I answered. After having looked at my records briefly, the doctor listened to my trembling heart. He said nothing. Next, he checked my hearing then my eyes. My records had mentioned my eye condition and that my eyes had been permanently damaged.

Adding to the damage was the Middle Eastern custom in those days of using great amounts of mascara on the eyes. The primitive medical practices of those days in that area called for a heavy application of kohl (a kind of mascara) applied as close to the eyeball as possible as a strengthener of eyesight and the eye muscles. Some people still practice this ancient technique, which was a precursor to the eye shadows of today. I remember my mother applying kohl to her eyes and then directly to mine, using the same applicator. This practice could have been the cause of my contracting trachoma.

The doctor noticed me quaking as he lifted each eyelid, muttering to himself. Finally, he gazed down on me and, grasping me by the shoulders, said, "I'm sorry but this little girl is not going to America. Her eyes will never make it." I was crushed and began to cry as I leaned back into the arms of the person behind me in line. My heart was broken again, and if my eyes were not sore from the trachoma, they certainly would be from the flood of tears. My only consolation came in knowing that I was only one of many who were similarly rejected. We comforted each other as we made our way back to our rooms. I could not accept the idea that I would never again see my family in America. I would absolutely refuse to return to Lebanon.

After a few days in the hotel a gentleman from the hotel staff approached me and offered to help. He proposed we sail to Genoa where some sort of passage to America could be arranged. His plan gave us hope and I was willing to try anything at that point.

When a week or so had passed, I boarded a ship for Genoa. Before I boarded the ship I penned a note to father in Boston telling him of my situation and asking him to mail some money. We had left Lebanon in search of a new life and I was determined to pursue this under any conditions. If the United States rejected me, I thought, perhaps I could get to Canada or Brazil or someplace from which I could someday finally arrive at my destination, America.

We were to arrive in Genoa the next morning. A large beer party began just after we were under way, and we kids toasted with milk and orange juice which we squeezed ourselves.

The gentleman at the hotel in Naples had arranged for an Arabic-speaking contact aboard ship who herded us together and told us that he would get us to Genoa and from there introduce us to another "contact" who would work on getting us across the Atlantic Ocean. I was wondering why he was always whispering to us. I began to wonder if what he was doing was suppossed to be secret. We were told to remain quiet and the less we talked the better chances we would have of someday being reunited with our families in America. I was a young girl and really didn't worry much about who was getting me to America, as long as I finally got there. Like other immigrant communities, the Arab community, too, had created an "underground railroad" in several major cities in Europe to facilitate immigration when all conventional means had failed.

The next morning we were a short distance from Genoa. We breakfasted on Italian rolls and milk and strolled along the deck. By mid-morning, the captain ordered everyone below because a storm was just ahead. A wonderful trip from Naples suddenly turned sour as waves began splashing against the bow of the ship and people were seasick all over the place. I realized that my luck so far had been good, but I feared the prospect of being caught in storms at sea.

As we made our approach to Genoa the stormy sea settled down somewhat. I had my packed bag beside me as I stood on the deck straining to catch a glimpse of Genoa. The waves were still high, though, and one reached up and doused me as I leaned over the rail at the bow.

Genoa looked as beautiful as Naples. As we pulled into the dock, merchants crowded below to sell all kinds of items and food to us. We threw coins down at them and they in turn threw our purchases up to us on deck.

Our contact man gathered us together and told us that we would not stop over in Genoa. We were only pausing there to drop off and pick up passengers, freight and mail. The new passengers scrambled aboard and told us how long some of them had waited for visas to America—in some cases, months or even years.

It would have been nice to stop, but I was happy that the ship was moving and taking me closer to my dear ones in that unknown land across the sea. Our next stop was Marseilles.

The same restless sea that brought us from Naples carried us all the way to Marseilles. On the dock at Marseilles, we again huddled with our contact man who had arranged accommodations for us in a boarding house where a group was already living while awaiting their voyage to America. A young girl from Damascus traveling with her parents became my roommate and close friend. She, too, suffered from eye trouble which prevented her from going to the United States. We spent hours commiserating about our common problem.

It was summertime in Marseilles and, like any city in that season, there was an atmosphere of leisure and joy. Sidewalk restaurants and silent movies were everywhere. This was my first chance ever to see a movie. It was the magic of magic, truly a miracle!

Today we take for granted such magnificent inventions as the light bulb, radio, and television. Those of us who lived in the era of dim candlelight and open manure-fueled fireplaces appreciate such conveniences with every breath we take.

One of the great moments of my stop in Marseilles was my visit to the zoo. I had heard about zoos back home in Ameeh, but the closest I had ever come to one was the animal habitat in our home there. The Marseilles zoo had a giant collection of animals, birds and sea life. Most of these I was now seeing for the first time.

As I walked through the zoo with my friends, a voice suddenly barked out at me, "Bonjour mademoiselle, comment allez-vous? Toujour l'amour?" To my delight, it turned out to be a beautifully colored parrot. I saw a parrot only once before in Ameeh at the estate of the miserly landlord, Soorsooh. That bird also used to wish everyone "good morning" as they approached him—but in Arabic, of course.

While strolling down through a poorer section of Marseilles one day with my girlfriend, I paused at a fruit stand to purchase some grapes. "Just like the grapes I used to pick in Ameeh," I remarked to her in Arabic. Suddenly, a young man who had also been making a purchase at the stand came to life and inquired, "Are you Arab?" When we told him we were from Ameeh, he became thoroughly interested. "Have you written to your folks in Lebanon?" he asked. "No, but I have written to my parents in America several times," I replied. He was amazed at this and immediately offered to help us, including writing letters. From that day, this young man from Lebanon, George Ziadeh, was our friend and advisor for the remainder of our stay in Marseilles.

As the weeks passed, the group with which I had arrived in Marseilles dwindled to just a few as more and more of my companions managed to obtain visas to the United States, Latin American countries, Canada and Australia. In a few cases, relatives arrived from the United States and Canada to help the processing of the immigrants and to accompany them on the last leg of their voyage to a new life. I was just learning how to hold onto the life I had.

I was repeatedly warned by our contact man and others not to venture about the city alone. It was not safe for an attractive young girl to be wandering about in strange places. Like any other city, Marseilles had its share of undesireables. Nevertheless, I went out one evening with a girlfriend from the hotel to sample Marseilles's evening festivities. As we began to make our way back to our hotel around 10 o'clock, we left the bright lights and the streets began to get darker. We noticed that there were men hanging out in groups on the street corners. My friend and I quickened our pace as we heard a steady pattern of footsteps behind us. We took turns glancing back as we entered a very secluded stretch just before reaching our hotel.

Two young men began to run after us. Suddenly, I stepped in a break in the pavement and tumbled to the ground. The two strangers caught up with me at that moment and stood in front of me with wiseguy looks on their faces. I ordered them aside in Arabic, and when they heard the strange language, they began to laugh and tried to grab me. I jack-knifed away from them and raced ahead. That night I learned to be more cautious. *Al-hamdu lillah li salamti.*

Marseilles's spectacular "Our Lady of the Sea" shrine sits atop a high hill commanding a view of the sea below. One of the statue's arms is raised in a beneficent gesture, as if the virgin were bestowing her blessings upon the sea. As I gazed up at this beautiful sight, I prayed for my reunion with my parents. In my mind I saw the Statue of Liberty appear and then disappear in the place where Our Lady stood. It was as if I were experiencing a vision, wherein Our Lady was giving me the confidence and hope I needed to continue my pursuit of happiness. As I prayed in the little chapel nearby, I took stock of my progress. I had come a long way, but there was still a long way to go.

I was becoming conditioned to being rejected at the immigration depot. I tried again and again to get out of Marseilles through regular channels, but to no avail. It was always the same old story of waiting in line, with a racing pulse and a perspiring brow as I surveyed the row of applicants and focused on the doctors at the desk up front. The words "I'm sorry child, but your eyes are not in a condition acceptable to American authorities" were as familiar to me as my bedtime prayers. Sadly I would retreat to the rear of the room where I waited and saw either smiling or frowning faces come back to join me. I could tell from the their expressions who would be going on to America and who would remain with me in Marseilles. I prayed and hoped for my my friends and myself, but there were times when I hoped that some of them would not be accepted so that a space might be left for me. I feared being left alone in this strange country as the others were authorized to travel. It was not long before this rejected group dwindled to four: two young men, an elderly gentleman, and me. Our conditions were similar—eye trouble.

After weeks of treatment, visits with no progress, the hope that we would someday legally qualify to emigrate from Marseilles faded. Treatments consisted of eye drops and various medicines. The methods were primitive and brought about little improvement. When I think back upon the way the doctors treated our eyes, it is a wonder we can see now at all.

One night there was a meeting of Frenchmen, some interested Lebanese and the four of us. The caucus was held in the room of one of my traveling friends in an atmosphere of clandestine secrecy as voices spoke in muffled tones and shades were drawn. The conversation dealt with the possibility that we four might be smuggled successfully into Belgium or the Netherlands. From there we would again be smuggled to our eventual destination. Evidently, others had been smuggled out of France in like fashion when all hopes for legal transfer had been exhausted.

The proprietor of our hotel, a French citizen of Arab descent, led the meeting and spoke of a French boat owner who would take us out of the country for a price. We were instructed to obtain a certain amount of money and pack. We were not sure when the ordeal would take place but were told it would happen soon. Luckily, I had just recieved a letter and check from father and mother in Boston and was prepared financially to join the group so long as the charge was not too exhorbitant. This time the fee was $25. This I had. But I would also have to pay for my lodging in France.

The night we were called together, I entered the hotel dining room and, seated at the opposite end of the table, was a most attractive Frenchman. He was in his early thirties and sported a well-trimmed moustache and a beret from which his jet black hair casually fell in waves. I thought he had a typical sailor look and thought him romantic, like a character one might read about in stories or see in those silent movies.

There was an almost reverent silence in the room as our host poured a very scarlet wine into goblets and served them to us. This reminded me of the large, fermenting barrel of wine which was housed in a barn not far from my home back in Ameeh. I had never seen a barrel as large as this one. Back home, we kids used to enjoy sneaking out to the barrel on occasion to snitch a little wine. The taste of wine was not foreign to me, and I accepted the goblet politely. According to my upbringing, it was unladylike to drink heavily—and smoking by girls was never permitted.

"A toast to the success of our mission," chuckled our host as everyone stood, tapped goblets and sampled the wine. It tingled down my throat and almost immiediately gave me a sense of floating on air. I didn't remember having this reaction to Ameeh wine, but it certainly was happening now! I guess the sailor visitor saw the look on my face and said "Do you like it?" I replied, "I'm not used to this kind of wine, what kind is it?"

"Good French wine young girl. I hope you like it because if you can't get up the courage to drink our good, hearty wine, then how in the world do you expect to have the courage to undertake the mission we are planning tonight?"

With that I made a bold attempt to polish off the rest of the drink, feeling giddier with every swallow. In fact, as the goblet emptied, I began to appreciate its contents even more. My resistance faded when our host refilled the goblets. I started on a laughing streak that seemed to continue for the remainder of the evening. For me it was quite a change from the somber mood I had been in for weeks and maybe I just needed to laugh and laugh.

The plan was for all four of us to be smuggled out of Marseilles in a French fishing boat which would be skippered by this gallant bereted Frenchman. We began our journey at 2:00 A.M. on the following Thursday morning and remained hidden in the boat until we arrived at our destination. Our route took us up the Rhone River and through various canals and other rivers until we crossed the French border into Belgium. This took us several days.

We passed quaint villages and beautiful farms as our little boat wended its way north. The tinkle of the canal gate-keeper's bell would wake me in the middle of the night as our able captain brought the boat to a halt for the payment of a toll. At times, we were allowed to sit in the open on the deck or to throw some makeshift fishing lines overboard to test our luck fishing in the fresh waters of France. When we passed a remote area we would occasionally stop to stretch or for lunch in a shady grove. One or two of us stood guard while the others relaxed. We were always cognizant of the fact that a French official or some other interested person could discover us and report us to the authorities. Then it would be back to Ameeh for me.

It was early morning when we sailed into a little port town. Evidently we had sailed into Belgium during the night when our captain managed to clear a border checkpoint while we were asleep. I was wakened by loud noises and the sounds of the boats banging against the moorings. Almost immediately we were instructed to gather our belongings and follow a Belgian woman who had scampered aboard and conversed with the captain in an emotional tone. Her tone changed abruptly when the captain slipped some money into her hand. He told her to lead us and to move quickly. In a matter of moments we bade farewell to our gallant skipper and were on our way to Brussels in the back of a farm wagon. I felt a little sad about leaving the captain behind. I think I had grown a little fond of him and was nursing a school girl crush on the big, handsome Frenchman.

Our destination in the Belgian capital was another lodging house run by an immigrant Lebanese couple. There we received bad news. Our host informed us that several groups had tried unsuccessfully to arrange visas through Belgian customs office only to find that the previously lenient requirements had stiffened considerably and passage out of Belgium was now as tough as it had been in France. When our advisors heard of my eye condition, they cast more gloom on my prospects. It appeared that the advice we had recieved in Marseilles was erroneous. Evidently our Marseilles contacts had not yet heard about the change that had taken place in the Brussels regulations.

After spending an evening in Brussels we decided to take the advice of our Syrian friends there just as we had all along. What else could we do?

We were advised to return to France, this time to Paris. They told us that passage could be arranged to the United States or to Canada from Paris more easily than any other city in France. If we failed in that attempt, we could obtain passage to England and try our luck from there. We were not too happy about going back to France after all the trouble we went through to get to Belgium, but again, we had little choice.

The train ride from Brussels to Paris was a new experience for us. We had been accustomed to carts and boats for so long that travel by rail was a pleasant change. I was fascinated at the speed with which the train sped past the villages. Our new contact man had been picked up in Brussels and was advising us of our schedule when we arrived in Paris. He told us there would be no problem crossing the Belgian border into France.

Before I knew it, I was in 'the city of lights.' I was flabbergasted at the vastness of the Paris railroad terminal as we coasted to a halt. Our contact man, Rashid, instructed us to wait in the station for him to return with our contact person. Several hours later, a very attractive woman approached our group with Rashid. She was introduced to us as Sadie and she explained that she had emigrated to Paris several years before from Beirut. Her father operated a lodging house for travelers and especially welcomed anyone from Lebanon or Syria. She advised us not to linger around Paris, but instead to accompany her directly to her house since the Paris police were keenly on the lookout for border crashers. This surprised me, since we crossed from Brussels without any hindrance. (I was later told that our contact man had bribed the French border officials.) Sadie and Rashid agreed that we would have a better chance of getting to America from England than from France.

Although we were becoming hardened and used to disappointment, I began to feel dejected and confused, as if my trip to the United States was on a merry-go-round. I envisioned myself back in Ameeh telling my friends there about my wild experiences around Europe, and I began to cry as I reflected on both the faces of Granny in Ameeh and mother in America. I wasn't sure which one of them I would ever see again and yearned for their love and affection. But I had to pick myself up and go on.

We were so anxious to see Paris that we talked Sadie into taking a roundabout way to her house for the chance to ride one of the famous double-decker buses. I was overjoyed at seeing this magnificent city from the top deck of an open-air conveyance. For the first time on my journey I felt like a tourist rather than an immigrant. Fountains and statues were everywhere. Buildings which came out of a dream. Museums and spiraling cathedrals. Paris was a sight for sore eyes.

Sadie expected we might be hungry and brought along some delicious Syrian bread sandwiches which we enjoyed with fruit juice. She reminded me of the generosity of Arabs in the Middle East. In that part of the world, even the poorest peasant is brought up in the tradition of hospitality. One is taught that, if a stranger knocks on your door, even your last crumb of bread and sliver of cheese should be brought out for the visitor and everything is done to make the guest feel at home. Sadie personified this spirit and reminded us of the heritage we were bringing with us from Lebanon and Syria. We thanked Sadie for all her assistance and made arrangements with her for our train ride to La Havre.

The trip to La Havre was short and uneventful. As we emerged from the train station, I could sense that we were in a port city again as the scent of salt air filled my nostrils. We were instructed to get to a certain port terminal where we would make contact with another French fisherman.

As we approached the pier, Rashid asked us to wait on a bench in the lounge while he went ahead to seek information. That day there were many French policemen on duty at the pier, waiting for the arrival of some dignitary who was due in from Liverpool. Whenever the policemen looked our way, I had the feeling that we would be questioned. It was probably easy for a Frenchman to tell that we were foreigners just by looking at us. For this reason we kept our voices down and scattered ourselves so that we would not be so conspicuous.

Soon Rashid emerged from one of the pier gates and beckoned us. We were ushered along the docks through an obstacle course of fishing nets and freshly-caught fish to a dilapidated pier, alongside of which was docked a fairly large fishing boat covered with drying nets. As we came aboard, we were met by the stocky little Frenchman who owned the boat. He invited us into his cabin where we were instructed how to hide under a mass of nets and other paraphernalia when we crossed the border into British waters. "Is she going too?" our French host blurted out with his mouth half full of the baguette he was chewing. "Very brave girl!" he concluded. But his intent gaze made me feel a bit timid.

The English Channel was unusually rough the evening we headed toward England. I had just joined my companions in an evening of anxiety highlighted by a late supper of bread and wine. After two glasses of wine, I was not sure whether it was the wine or the churning sea that was getting to me. Rashid placed his warm hand protectingly on my forehead whenever I leaned over the rail to watch the sea gyrate below me. A wisp of ocean spray would waken me from a semiconscious state brought on by my old enemy, seasickness. A cup of hot tea finally made me feel better as I huddled in the corner of the boat, snuggling in a warm blanket which our host placed over my sholders. "Is that England?" I shouted as every island we passed came into view. "Get down and be quiet, we're in British waters now," Rashid warned.

It was now getting very dark and the waters of the Channel took on sinister shadows as the cold of the evening settled on us. A heavy blanket of fog and a slight drizzle descended upon us. The lonely, dreary setting was punctuated by the ringing of the channel buoy bells and the distant cacophony of fog horns and boat whistles.

All kinds of thoughts invaded my mind as I sat there and trembled under my dampening blanket. I thought of warm, sunny days back in Ameeh, the sweet face of my grandmother, and then her sad face with the tears rolling her cheeks at my departure. Then thoughts turned to beautiful Naples . . . Genoa . . . Mt. Vesuvius . . . the handsome fisherman back in Marseilles . . . my dear cousin Sadie . . . the double decker ride in Paris . . . my last glimpse of father and mother as they left Ameeh for America and my life-long ambition to see them again . . . my brothers and sisters . . . the miles which separated us . . . a sinking boat?

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the captain's order: "Everyone below!" I didn't have to understand French to realize what was happening. Evidently, a British patrol boat had intercepted us, and above the chattering of my teeth I could hear the exchange of greetings. My traveling companions and I stayed quietly below as our boat was moored. At least one hour passed since we last heard the Captain speaking up on the deck. It seemed like forever. What could have happened? Was he arrested? Did the British know we are here? We had no other choice but to wait. I was now quite accustomed to waiting.

I uttered a great sigh of relief as I heard the words, "*Wainhun? . . . Khudnee Li'andhun!*" (where are they . . . take me to them). Heavy footsteps on the upper deck told us that our host had arranged some sort of contact. A tall, lanky man came into view for a moment, then disappeared.

In a short while we were underway again. After Rashid assured us that we would soon be in England, I surrendered to my fatigue and fell into an uneasy sleep. I had barely closed my eyes when Rashid shook me awake. Outside dawn was creeping across the Channel. I had my first distant glimpse of Liverpool and England.

The early morning sun illuminated our way as we arrived and were taken to a lodging house in Liverpool. One of the first things I did after settling down in our new quarters was to write a letter to father to let him know where I was and when I expected to get to America, if at all. I would also ask him to send more money to help finance the remainder of my trip.

My main objective in Liverpool was to overcome my eye problem. My friends at the lodging house referred me to a doctor. He began by pulling my eyelids up to get a good look at them. As I writhed in pain he placed some sort of abrasive salve on my eyeballs and then begin to rub them. When this very painful process was over, I felt more blind than ever. I was forced to undergo this cruel treatment twice a week. I don't know how I maintained the courage to return to this torture, but my ambition and desire to get to America overcame all of my reservations, and perhaps some of the pain.

After some weeks I recieved a welcome letter from father and an accompanying check for $15, which was most generous for those days. My mother and father worked very hard to earn enough to maintain an immigrant family in Boston and send me the funds to help me to rejoin them. Immigrant parents certainly tasted the bitter fruits of deprivation, sacrifice, and discrimination, but my parents had to endure the additional burden of a lost daughter.

With the money my family managed to send me I began to prepare for my putative "homecoming." I wanted to look my best for them when I arrived. But my wardrobe consisted of a few tattered old dresses. I decided I would splurge at one of the Liverpool shops and purchase an outfit for myself—a two-piece outfit in navy blue. I thought it was absolutely gorgeous. It fit me just perfectly. In the shop, I pirouetted in front of the giant dressing room mirrors. I was dancing for joy as my companion, Nabeeha, and I joked about the new "princess" who had just arrived in England dressed in a navy blue suit.

After a few weeks in Liverpool and frequent visits to the eye doctor for my "torture" treament, I was ready to approach the immigration authorities to find out whether or not they would allow me to immigrate to America. The long corridor in the government building led to a large office and I was ushered to a seat in the waiting room. Except for a small infant, I was the only child there that day. The wait was close to an hour and a half. Finally, I was called before two gentlemen, one of whom was introduced by my interpreter as the doctor, the other as an immigration official from the United States. The third gentleman was an English official. A discussion ensued. The doctor came over to me and studied my eyes for some time. I did not like the look on his face and a feeling of sadness crept over me as he shook his head. I braced myself for another in a long series of blows as the interpreter was instructed to tell me something: "They say you cannot go to America because the immigration authorities would never allow you in with your eyes in this condition." My desperation must have been obvious and he grasped my sholders and continued, "But be happy and thankful, because they also said you can go to Canada where you will be only a short distance from your family and have a greater chance of being reunited with them than here in England." When they showed me on a map how close Canada—and, in particular, Halifax, Nova Scotia—was to Boston, I felt so much better and the old feeling of hope again swelled within me.

Our stay in England had come to an end and the arrangements were made for me to board a ship in Liverpool destined for Halifax. The line waiting to board the trans-oceanic vessel was longer than any other I had endured, but somehow I didn't mind this one so much.

Finally, I was at the desk and the words, "Everything is in order, you may pass," rang like a clarion church bell on a Sunday morning. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry as I scrambled onto the deck of the towering ship, leaving my bag behind at the desk. An attendant raced after me and cautioned me not to leave things behind and never to run. I couldn't help it. I rushed into the arms of waiting friends who had already boarded. Together we formed a ring and jumped for joy. It was truly a glorious moment.

There were four passengers on that ship traveling from the Middle East. Two of them were from Jerusalem, Palestine, and two were from Syria. We kept each other company and mingled with the other passengers who were either tourists or immigrants to the New World from various parts of Europe. We were all anxious for our landing in Halifax nine days later. The ocean remained calm for those nine days. The tempest which had tossed me from Beruit through Liverpool seemed to have subsided for a while on the way to a new life.

My third-class accommodations on the way to Halifax were in the hull of the ship; in spite of this, my spirits were high. Occasionally, I was able to slip up onto the first-class deck and stroll among those who enjoyed the amenities of the ship. In the first-class section I saw a different world—music, fine fashions, waiters and elegant appointments. It was as if the ship had been transformed completely as I moved from the lower to upper decks. Of course, my poorer accommodations didn't matter one bit because I was thankful I was on the ship heading "home."

The morning of our arrival finally came and most passengers were on the top deck to get a good view of this new land. The sun shone brightly and I can still see the stark white albatross tracing circles against an azure sky.

Although I had been assured in England that I would be admitted into Canada, my past record of rejection was enough to make me feel apprehensive as I stepped down the long gangplank and moved slowly in a very long line toward another desk with two physicians and other personnel. I could see that we were to be subjected to another check-up. By now I had developed "check-up fever" as I clutched my bag and tried not to think of what might happen at the checkpoint ahead.

The line was a picture of hope and struggle and pity as children tugged at their parents' sleeves and elderly people tottered toward what seemed to be their last refuge from a life of misfortune and misery.

Some of the immigrants were ushered to the right to what appeared to be a holding bay for those who passed scrutiny. Others were being led to the left to stations which looked like detention barracks. The faces of those people on the left revealed that they were the unfortunate ones who did not qualify for admission into the country and had to be detained for one reason or another.

Finally, I stood before the physicians and braced myself for the heartbreaking verdict. I was instructed to step to the left. I was visably shaken as I was led into a small cubicle with only one small window which in every way resembled a jail cell. The attendant said something to me in English, but of course I did not understand. I just sat down on a small stool, the only object in the cell except for a simple cot.

I wept. As far as I was concerned, the whole world was ending for me right then and there in this hot little cell.

During my 3-hour confinement, I could hear the muffled sounds of the outside world which I interpreted as a knell of doom for me and my dream. As footsteps approached the locked door, my heart stood still until the steps continued away. I then continued my interrupted prayer. Visions of rejection and a miserable return to Lebanon haunted me. I was alone, unwanted in an immigration depot. Stranded. Thousands of miles from Lebanon and so close to an elusive dream.

A knock on the cell door pulled me out of my daydream. I stood immediately and blurted out a weak "Who is it?" in Arabic. An immigration official entered with a young man who looked to be of Middle Eastern origin. "I want you to meet Boutros al-'Allam, a resident of Halifax and a man who speaks Arabic," said the offical whose words were subsequently translated for me by Mr. al-'Allam himself. The sound of my native Arabic language was music to my ears. I rushed to my new Arabic-speaking friend and threw my arms around him tearfully and excitedly and told him how good it was to see someone who could understand my language. Mr. al-'Allam explained he was a volunteer worker who assisted Arab immigrants. He said that I would be taken to a hospital just ouside of Halifax where I would be examined thoroughly and that he would remain with me until I was settled.

Hope again was restored within me as the two gentlemen and I walked briskly off the pier and climbed aboard a horse-drawn wagon waiting at the gate. What a coincidence it was that, having left my native Ameeh by donkey cart, my first ride in the New World would be by horse cart.

At the hospital, an eye specialist visited me every few days. Treatments there consisted of eye lotions and mild salves. The horrible practice of rubbing abrasives onto the eye to cure trachoma was not practiced in Canada. *Nashkur Allah!* As a result, my eye condition seemed to be vastly improved.

A letter to mother and father was soon answered. They were delighted to know I was now in Canada and encouraged me to "hang on" for the final stretch. They enclosed a small check which would have to sustain me while at the hospital. I would manage with whatever they could send me so that I could pay the $8-a-week room and board fee and still have something for unexpected expenses.

I was in the hospital for only two weeks when the board of specialists covened to settle the pending immigration cases, including mine.

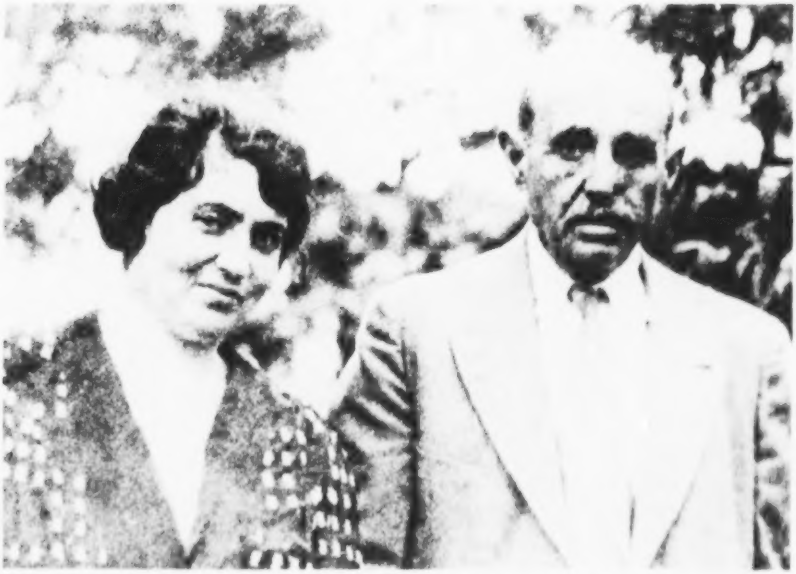
The first to see me was a Canadian specialist. Then I passed to another doctor who carefully examined my eyes and muttered orders which were written into a record by a nurse. Finally I was examined by an American doctor who would have final say in my case. He looked into my eyes and, after some contemplation, shook his head. I could feel my legs tremble. In Arabic I cried out, "Oh God, don't let it happen again . . . .why . . . .why . . . how much can I be made to suffer!" I began to believe I had been cursed back in Ameeh and I would never see my family again. Maybe there was something in the old superstitions after all.

I could not believe that I was seeing the American doctor's head shaking back and forth. I felt like grabbing his head and making it nod yes, yes . . . YES. His examination was interrupted by a gush of tears from my eyes. His eyes turned away fom mine as if he could not find the nerve to face me with his decision. "This girl is not ready for immigration to the United States, I'm sorry to say." At that point, one of the Canadian specialists lunged across the room and yelled, "For Christ's Sake!" My head shot up from its bowed position as the animated staff doctor scooted across the floor.

"For God's sake, do you people know the record and the background of this child?" he shouted. "Do any of you realize what this little 14-year-old girl has gone through for the past several months? It's inhumane to put a child through this kind of mental and physical torture. All she is asking for is the chance to be reunited with her parents and family whom she hasn't seen for many years since she was a small child! Where the hell does compassion come into your decisions? I won't stand for anything but acceptance for this poor tortured youngster. Let her into the United States and let her be totally cured here!"

I was amazed at this scene. I couldn't believe that a doctor would defend me in the way this man did. I didn't really understand his words, but I knew he was angry with the American doctor. After a short conference involving all the physicians, one of the staff doctors came to me and, placing his arm around me, said, "You're going home dear . . . .your going home." My arms flung around him, and I could tell that my new life would begin at last as he wiped the tears from my tortured eyes and comforted me in my moment of release. He held up a document bearing a new stamp of approval, the ink still wet. I kissed him, then I kissed the document.

At long last, I was going home. ◆



Delia A. Tinory at approximate age 35 with father Abraham Corey.

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